

The background features a large, detailed illustration of a castle with multiple towers and spires under a blue sky with clouds. In the foreground, a man with black hair and a dark blue outfit stands next to a large white wolf. A small white dragon-like creature is perched on the wolf's back. To the left, a young girl with blonde hair in a pink and purple dress is smiling, and a woman in a maid uniform stands behind her.

ISEKAI TENSEI: RECRUITED TO ANOTHER WORLD

4

Story by Kenichi
Illustrations by Nem



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② Name: Rocket

AGE 9 CLASS Slime

TITLE Tenma's Follower

HP 6000 MP 12000

STRENGTH C+ DEFENSE B AGILITY B+

MAGIC A- MIND B+ GROWTH B

LUCK B

SKILLS Time-Space Magic: 8 •
Magic Manipulation: 8 • Debuff Resistance: 8 •
Endurance: 5 • Brawling: 5 • Omni-Elemental: 4

③ Name: Shiromaru

AGE 5 CLASS Mythical Wolf

TITLE Tenma's Follower

HP 23000 MP 14000

STRENGTH A+ DEFENSE A AGILITY S-

MAGIC A MIND C- GROWTH A

LUCK B

SKILLS Nightvision: 10 • Brawling: 8 •
Debuff Resistance: 6 • Physical Ability Boost: 6 •
Sensory Buff: 6 • Vitality Boost: 5 • Endurance: 3 •
Magic Manipulation: 2

GIFTS Protection of the God of Beasts

① Name: Tenma Otori

AGE 15 CLASS Human

TITLE Sage's Apprentice, Tamer, Dragonslayer,
First-Class Adventurer, (Favorite Child of the Gods)

HP 22000 MP 36000

STRENGTH A DEFENSE A+ AGILITY A

MAGIC SS+ MIND S- GROWTH SS+

LUCK B

SKILLS Fire Magic: 10 • Water Magic: 10 •
Follower Buff: 10 • Alchemy: 10 •
Magic Manipulation: 10 • Tame: 10 • Light Magic: 9 •
Wind Magic: 9 • Cooking: 9 • Dismantle Items: 9 •
Earth Magic: 9 • Sword: 9 • Brawling: 9 • Rod: 9 •
Traps: 9 • Enchantment: 9 • Nightvision: 9 •
Magic Boost: 9 • Time-Space Magic: 8 •
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Omni-Elemental: 6 (10) • (Identify): 10 •
Detection: 10 • Conceal: 10 •
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Recovery Boost: 8 • Debuff Resistance: 8 •
Sensory Buff: 8 • Physical Ability Boost: 7 •
Combat Master: 6 • Destruction Boost: 5 •
Destruction Resistance: 5 •
Instant Kill Resistance: 5)

GIFTS Protection of the Gods

Chapter Four

Part One

“ACHOO!”

“Tenma, are you all right?”

On the way to the capital, I started feeling a ticklish sensation in my nose that grew more and more intense until I had to sneeze. Apparently it was loud enough that Jeanne heard it from the driver’s seat and checked in with me out of concern.

“Yeah, I’m fine. My nose was ticklish.”

As the weather was good today, we were taking a cart instead of the usual carriage. That was why Jeanne could hear me so clearly from the driver’s seat.

“Goodness! Don’t you two sound all lovey-dovey.” Aura was teasing us, as usual.

“You’re not going to get to me with comments like that, you know! I’m used to it!” By this point, Jeanne had built up an immunity to Aura’s jabs.

Aura gave Jeanne a bored look in response, but then an idea must have popped into her head because she got a naughty look on her face. “Master Tenma? Tonight, when we go to sleep, you two can use the magic carriage. I’ll sleep outside, of course. Oh, and don’t worry! I won’t peek or eavesdrop, *no matter what I he*— Oof!”

Before Aura could finish her sentence, I flicked a pebble at her with my fingers, and it landed squarely in the middle of her forehead. I hadn’t used much force, but since it was unexpected, it startled her, and she staggered backwards.

“Aura! Knock it off already! Stop saying all those weird things!” Jeanne’s face turned bright red as she continued the assault. Well, to be more accurate, she just took some twigs from the bundle of kindling piled up behind the driver’s seat and threw them at Aura.

However, since Jeanne had gotten considerably stronger from her training, this attack was enough to knock Aura down.

Since the firewood was scattered all over the ground and Aura was now unconscious, I decided it would be the perfect time to take our lunch break. Shiromaru and Solomon played together as they gathered the wood for us, so the cleanup didn’t take much time at all.

“All right—I think I’m gonna grill some meat today!” I piled up some rocks that were lying around nearby to use as a foundation, put firewood on top and lit it, then laid my cooking plate on top.

While I waited for my plate to heat up, I sliced the meat. Meanwhile, my little piggies sat obediently by my side, waiting with drool dripping from their mouths.

I relented and wrapped some raw meat in lettuce and fed it to them. They ate it, skillfully spitting out only the lettuce before begging for more meat.

“Awooo!”

“Squee!”

When I threatened them with a dose of my iron fists, though, they reluctantly began nibbling on the lettuce.

“Tenma! Aura’s conscious!”

“All right—time to have lunch!”

I’d just finished grilling the meat, and a delectable aroma filled the air. I’d seasoned the meat with salt and my original marinade. We also had salad, bread, and milk.

Now conscious, Aura looked around as she rubbed her forehead, then sat down next to Jeanne.

“Thank you for this food.”

“Thank you for this food,” Aura and Jeanne echoed.

“Wuff!”

“Squee!”

Actually, it was rare to see anyone in this world praying with their hands folded before they ate a meal, except for devout followers of religion. Most people offered a toast like nobles did, or other simple verbal prayers. It was rare for someone to say “thank you” for their meal and fold their hands in prayer like I did, but since this custom wasn’t completely unheard of in this world, Jeanne and Aura naturally followed suit.

“By the way, Tenma. Are you sure we’re on the right road to the capital? The last sign we saw said it was to the right,” Jeanne said.

“Are we going somewhere else?” Aura asked.

Both of them asked me this just as we were about done with lunch. The question must have been on their minds for a while now.

“Yeah. It’s a bit of a detour, but I heard that there are wild cows that graze in a meadow nearby. I was thinking of hunting two or three of them for their meat so we can have beef.”

At the mention of beef, Shiromaru and Solomon began freaking out. It seemed like they wanted to eat some *immediately*.

“Shiromaru, Solomon. Just so you know, cows aren’t harmful beasts—you’re not allowed to kill too many of them!”

They both nodded with serious looks on their faces, but there were still copious amounts of drool dripping from their mouths. I decided that, worst-case scenario, I’d just stuff ’em into my bag.

“Beef is delicious, isn’t it, Shiromaru?”

“We’ve only been eating pork lately... Orc, that is. I bet you’re dying for some beef, huh?”

Seemingly oblivious to my feelings, Jeanne petted Shiromaru

while Aura began rattling off all the ways she would cook the beef.

Anyway, since we were all in agreement, we decided to head towards that meadow to hunt the cows. We traveled for about an hour and came to a river, which we then followed for another hour until we came to the meadow.

“Aura, can you see the cows?”

“There don’t seem to be any nearby. Are you sure they’re around here?”

As we entered the meadow, the girls squinted as they looked around for cows, but there weren’t any in sight. I used Detection just in case with a radius of two kilometers, but all I could find were rabbits. There were no creatures larger than ourselves in the vicinity.

“Solomon, fly around and look for the cows. Shiromaru, if you smell any, let me know.”

“Wuff!”

“Squee!”

I gave the two of them orders, then continued through the meadow towards the capital for a while. All of a sudden, Solomon landed beside me and started flailing around. It seemed he was trying to communicate something.

“Tenma, did he find the cows?” Jeanne asked, but it seemed Solomon wanted to tell me something else. He shook his head and stared at me.

“What is it, Solomon? Uh-huh, uh-huh... What did you just say?! All right, we’ll head there immediately!”

“What?! You understood him just now?”

“Pretty much, yeah!”

I rode Valley Wind in the direction Solomon indicated.

“So, what did Solomon say?”

“Someone’s being attacked by a group of cows up ahead by the river!”

I couldn’t go as fast as I wanted to with Valley Wind pulling the cart, so I said, “Sorry, but I gotta go on ahead! I’ll summon some golems to pull the cart! Shiromaru—you guard Jeanne and Aura! Solomon, lead the way!” I took four golem cores out of my bag and threw them on the ground. “They’re the kind that will obey your commands. You guys take care of the rest!”

I unhitched the wagon from Valley Wind and then hopped back onto him. After making sure the golems appeared, I chased after Solomon. Now free of the wagon, I was able to go as fast as I wanted, and before long I was riding Valley Wind like a jockey on a horse.

It had been a while since I’d run a horse full-out. As such, it was a little uncomfortable, but this was no time to complain.

Less than ten minutes after I left the girls, I spotted two children

who were being attacked. It was a boy and a girl who seemed to be the same age. They were dressed in fine clothes and appeared to be nobles, and had several male bodyguards around them.

The cows were charging the group so fiercely that the men were losing due to the difference in numbers.

“Take that!” I yelled loud enough for the guards and the cows both to hear me as I ran Valley Wind into the animals, kicking them aside. I wedged myself between them and the humans, forcing the animals to back away.

Startled at my sudden appearance, both humans and cows froze up for a moment.

“Stone Wall!”

I made a wall appear between both parties, successfully separating them. Once the children and guards saw the thick stone wall appear, they all looked relieved. But when the cows came back to their senses, they began ramming their bodies against the wall in an attempt to bust through.

I had no idea why the cows were rampaging like this, but I saw that some of them had broken horns, and some were staggering around like they had a concussion. And yet they continued ramming into the wall. The nearly thirty heads of cattle outside the walls were all completely berserk.

“What the hell happened to them?” The strange sight shocked me, and I turned towards the children. It wasn’t long before I discovered the source of the cows’ anger.

“I don’t know who you are, but please! Help us!” The children noticed my gaze and ran over to me, bowing their heads. But I slapped them on the cheeks without hesitation. I tried not to do it too hard, but the children still fell on their behinds, their cheeks swollen and red. They were bewildered by my sudden strike, and the guards around them were outraged.

“You bastard! How dare you! Do you know who these children are?!”

“We cannot forgive your barbaric violence!”

Two of the guards drew their swords and tried to attack me, but I cast magic on them before they could even swing their blades, knocking them unconscious. The remaining guards were more severely injured and fatigued than the ones who’d tried to attack me. They had fallen weakly to the ground the moment I’d made the wall, but once they saw what I was doing, they quickly rose to their feet and drew their swords.

“Do you have any idea why I slapped you?” I asked the two children, ignoring the guards. They shook their heads silently. Left without a choice, I grabbed the boy, who appeared to be the older of

the two, and forced him to look. “Any creature would go mad with rage if their beloved children were killed.”

I had forced him to look over at the bodies of ten calves, which had either been pierced through with magic or slashed to death with swords. Judging by the number of cows outside the wall, it was safe to say that every last one of their babies had been killed.

“And now that this has happened, these cows will attack any human they see. It’s a shame, but there’s no choice but to kill the rest of the cows too.” I paused, looking at the children again. “I won’t deny that I’m a hunter myself. I’m an adventurer, after all. But I won’t tolerate people who do it just for fun, killing from a safe location without putting themselves in danger. If that’s the kind of person running this kingdom, the country will fall into ruin.”

There were the remnants of a magic wall around the calves’ bodies. I had a feeling they had used some kind of method to lure the parents—specifically the males—away from the herd while they enclosed the baby cows within the magic walls and killed them.

If they had done this for meat, maybe I wouldn’t have been so angry. But I could tell by the violent magical scars and stab wounds on their bodies that that had not been the case.

While I looked at the calves, the wall could no longer withstand the rampage of the adult cows and finally fell. Most of the cows who appeared before us had broken horns and bloody heads. They were so unsteady on their feet it wouldn’t have surprised me if they’d collapsed at any moment, but their eyes were bloodshot, consumed with an intense fury and hatred towards us.

“I’m sorry...” I murmured as I shot Light magic towards the cows. The magic burst in front of the cows, filling the area with light and blinding them. I’d closed my eyes a second before the light had exploded, taken my sword from my bag, and ran around the herd of cows, using their malice to sense their locations as I slashed them with my blade. I used one swing per cow, slicing off their heads in one quick motion to lessen their suffering.

When the light subsided and the surroundings appeared again, the bodies of thirty-one cows lay on the ground. I knew this was the only thing I could have done, but I certainly didn’t feel good about it.

I wiped the blood from my blade and sheathed my sword. I summoned some golems and had them gather the cows’ heads and bodies, and put just the bodies into my magic bag.

When the children and guards saw that I had summoned golems, they were both surprised and cautious, but I ignored them and used magic to dig holes in the earth. I instructed the golems to bury the bodies of the calves, along with the heads of the adult cows.

Once they were finished, I cast Fire magic into the holes, burning

the bodies until only bones remained.

About a half hour had passed since I began burning the cows when Jeanne and Aura finally arrived.

“What are you grilling, Tenma? And who are those people?”

The guards looked cautious again at the appearance of the girls and the golem-drawn wagon, but the girls ignored them as they approached me.

“These are the fools who caused this whole commotion.”

The girls glanced at the children and the guards at these words. They didn’t seem to understand.

What I said had made the guards angry. Their faces turned red, and they opened their mouths to yell, but Shiromaru reacted to their hostile behavior and began growling. This frightened them, and the color quickly drained from their faces.

“I finished burying them, so let’s get to the capital,” I told the girls after I was done burying the cows’ bones. I collected the cores from the golems and put them back into my bag, then hitched Valley Wind back up to the carriage.

Meanwhile, Shiromaru and Solomon seemed to be earnestly searching for something where the earthen wall had been, burying their noses in the ground as they walked.

“What is it?” Shiromaru looked up at me when he heard my voice. He had two cow horns in his mouth. As for Solomon, not only did he have a horn in his mouth, but he was holding two in each hand and one with his foot, for a total of four horns.

Shiromaru looked jealous to see Solomon’s loot, so I took his two horns and had them gather all the remaining horns they could find lying around. For now, I decided to stow the horns in my bag.

Once they realized I was allowing them to bring all the horns with us, they looked thrilled and began racing around to gather them all up.

“Um, uh...”

I heard the boy’s voice from behind me as I watched Shiromaru and Solomon.

“What is it?”

The boy shrank back from my unfriendly tone, but recovered quickly. “I’m very sorry! And thank you very much!” he said, giving me a dramatic bow. The girl next to him seemed surprised by his behavior, but quickly followed suit.

The guards looked surprised too. They went to stop the children, but Shiromaru stood in front of the guards, threatening them.

“Grrrrr...”

The guards reached for their swords when Shiromaru got in their

way, but raised both hands in surrender when he started growling.

The boy and girl looked momentarily frightened by Shiromaru's growls, but then directed their eyes towards me again. Honestly, they had more guts than their guards. Must have been in their blood.

"If that's all, then you'll have to excuse me, *Your Highness*."

Stunned, the children and their guards all fell silent.

"How did you know?!" the girl exclaimed. Once she realized what she'd blurted out, she clapped her hands over her mouth, but it was already too late.

"How did you know?" the boy repeated, giving up on concealing his identity. His posture wasn't as straight as it had been a few moments ago, and I had a feeling he was getting ready to run, depending on my answer.

"Just a hunch," I bluffed, unable to tell him I had used Identify on him.

Name: Tida von Blumere Krastin

Age: 12

Class: Human

Title: Prince of the Kingdom of Krastin, Second in Line to the Throne

Name: Luna von Blumere Krastin

Age: 8

Class: Human

Title: Princess of the Kingdom of Krastin, Third in Line to the Throne

"Do you really think I'll believe that your hunch was enough to figure out our identities?" Tida stood protectively in front of Luna. I couldn't blame him for feeling that way, and decided to give him a better answer.



“You look like someone I’ve met before.”

“So what?” That made Tida look even more suspicious.

“Have you ever heard of Kukuri Village?” I saw a hint of recognition on his face. “Five years ago, a certain person was on the way to Kukuri Village when he was attacked by a group of orcs, and he was saved by a certain child. He asked the child to join his guard, but the child turned him down. Ring any bells?”

Tida stared at me in disbelief. It seemed that he had definitely heard about me from the king.

“I’m the child who turned down his offer. My name is Tenma, and I’m from Kukuri Village.”

Tida pointed at me, looking stunned. “*You’re* Dragonslayer Tenma?!”

“I’ve never heard anyone call me that before, but I did kill a dragon. It was a zombie, though.”

All of a sudden, Tida straightened up. “Please forgive me!” And for some reason, he apologized to me as well.

Luna stared at my face and said, “Tida, is this really Tenma? Is this really the hero?”

I reacted to the word she used because I wasn’t used to hearing it. “What hero?” I asked her.

“Grandpa says Tenma is a hero who slew a dragon all by himself to save the kingdom.”

What in the world is that king telling his own grandchildren, seriously? Still, I wasn’t sure why Tida had frozen up like that. “Why are you just standing there?” Giving up, I just asked him. He seemed so nervous he had gone unresponsive, and I noticed that he was looking a little pale too.

“Oh, er... Grandpa says that anyone who can kill a dragon is just as powerful as a dragon. And that anyone who makes an enemy out of someone like that could destroy the kingdom, so he told us to be careful.”

What in the world is the king saying about me? Don’t use me to discipline kids! But of course, as I couldn’t say that out loud, I just held in my anger.

Tida began to tremble when he saw how I looked. “I’m sorry! Please at least spare my sister! She didn’t do anything wrong! Please don’t kill my sister!”

“Who said anything about killing anyone?” I quipped. But with how frantic his plea had been, I probably shouldn’t have joked about it, because now Tida was thoroughly frightened.

“Don’t bully my brother! He was just doing what the minister said and practicing!”

Ahh—now I was finding out who was behind all of this.

“What did the minister say?”

“The minister said that in order to be the king, you have to be experienced in battle. And since this is the season in which calves are being born, he should go practice on those.”

It wasn't clear exactly who this minister was, but one thing I did understand from what Luna had told me was that that was the person who had influenced the children to do this.

“Listen up, you two. I don't care if it was the minister who said it, but you can't believe everything you hear. You were lucky that I just happened to be passing by to save you, but if I hadn't been here, you probably would've died.”

This realization hit them and they both began to tremble.

“And if you two had died, not only would the royal family be sad, but it's highly possible the minister and any of your guards who did survive would be executed. Their families might have been punished too.”

Now all the color drained from the guards' faces. Since they had been chosen to keep the royal family safe, then they were probably the pride of their own families. And certainly they would never have dreamed that their families would be executed because of them.

“If you had just consulted with the royal family, this never would've happened. Under normal circumstances, if you said, ‘Hey, I'm going to get battle experience by killing a bunch of calves!’ the royal family would be furious.”

Tida lowered his face, but Luna didn't seem to understand. “But calves are veal. I've had veal steak and veal soup and eaten veal tons of times. Is that wrong too?” she asked.

I thought it would be difficult to explain this in a way that a child could understand. In the same vein, I always thought it was strange how in my previous world people would say that eating whales and dolphins was cruel, but didn't say the same thing about eating cows and pigs.

Maybe they felt that way because whales were endangered and it was impossible for humans to intervene to increase the population...but did that mean it was okay to breed cows and pigs just to kill them and eat them later?

The value of life seemed rather poorly defined in my previous world, but in this one, where the concept of species conservation didn't really exist, there were still a considerable number of cows.

I wasn't sure if I could explain it properly, but I tried to convey my beliefs in a way that would be easy for them to understand. “First of all, I'm not saying that what I'm saying is the absolute truth. Everyone has their own opinions. But when humans eat other

creatures, they get their strength to live from them. Does that make sense?"

"Yes."

"So in other words, the veal you eat becomes your life source. But the calves you killed today had nothing to do with your survival; they were killed for sport. That means the lives of those calves were wasted. The older cows recognized this, and that's why they were angry. If it had just been one or two that had been killed, the cows would've probably just chalked it up to the order of things and gave up, taking their surviving babies and running away to protect them. But how else could they react other than with anger after every single one of their babies had been killed? And that's why they tried to kill you. If someone hurt someone in your family, you might try to run away with them. But if they *killed* someone in your family, wouldn't you hate the person who did it? That's how the adult cows felt."

Of course, I didn't actually know how cows felt, but I figured it might be something along these lines. Luna seemed to be a child who was earnest at heart, because she immediately took what I said as the truth. Tears began welling up in her eyes.

"So what we did was..."

"You cruelly killed the calves, for nothing but your own amusement," I said calmly, laying out the facts.

Once Luna realized what they had done, big tears began to stream down her face. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, cows!" She ran over to the place where I'd burned the cows and apologized to them through her sobs.

Tida watched her, then turned towards me with a serious expression on his face. "But what about war? That's just people killing huge groups of other people, and that doesn't have anything to do with eating."

I'd never experienced war, and I only knew what my grandpas from my previous life had told me about it. I thought about it for a moment and then told him what I felt. "I've never experienced war before, but I think there are many types of wars."

"Many types?"

"Wars fought for survival, wars fought to protect something, wars fought to preserve pride, wars fought out of greed... There are all sorts of reasons. But the one common thread is that they all involve killing each other, and once you get caught up in one, you can't hesitate to take someone else's life or else you or someone you love could die. So, people kill each other during wars. Sure, it's not true all the time, but of course the world would be a better place without wars."

"So then, why do wars happen in the first place?"

His question was simple, but at the same time incredibly difficult

to answer. I took a breath and replied, "Because we're human. Humans have all sorts of different opinions. We want to be happier than others, become blessed and rich, and when all those opinions mix, sometimes others don't understand our opinions and we clash, leading to wars. That's just a guess on my part, though."

I wasn't sure if Tida was satisfied with my answer, but he didn't ask me anything else. He watched Luna cry for a while, comforted her, and then came back to me. "Tenma, may I please have one of the cows?"

"Why?"

"I know this is just for my own satisfaction, but I don't want their life to have been wasted. I'll pay you, of course."

He spoke, looking me straight in the eyes. I took one of the cows out of my bag. "You don't need to pay me. But when you eat this cow, I want you to remember this day, and never forget it." I handed it over to him.

"Thank you," Tida said, and put the cow into his own bag.

Suddenly I realized something. "How are you getting home to the capital?" The carriage they had come here on had overturned, and its wheels were broken. The horses that had been hitched to it must all have fled, because they were nowhere to be seen. It would take about five to six hours on horseback to get to the capital from here, and about half a day by carriage. I was planning to get there within the day myself, but what would these two—and their guards—do?

Shiromaru suddenly began looking towards the capital with caution. I used magic to enhance my vision, following his gaze, and saw a cloud of dust up ahead. It seemed that dozens of horses were running towards us.

Part Two

I had Shiromaru wait next to the carriage just in case, and put Jeanne and Aura inside, instructing them to be on guard.

But it was a needless worry. The people around us couldn't see them yet, but since my eyesight was boosted, I saw a group of armed knights coming towards us.

"It looks like knights are on their way. They're wearing the royal crest."

They stared at me in disbelief, but within ten minutes, the knights came into view.

"You over there! Get away from them!" The knight in the front shouted at me. I moved away from Tida and went over to the carriage. Meanwhile, the knights split into two groups. One went over to the children, and the other surrounded me. The knights surrounding me were armed with swords, so I took my adamantium sword from my bag, just in case.

"You bastard! Do you intend to resist?!" the same knight shouted.

I glared back and said, "Oh, are there bandits who call themselves knights now? Or do the knights from the royal capital really lack such manners that they'd draw their swords against someone who saved the prince's life?"

"What did you say?!"

Apparently the knights were sensitive to provocation. He was about to continue, but Tida stepped in between us.

"Put down your weapons! Master Tenma saved my and my sister's life! Don't you dare raise your swords towards him!"

All the knights fell silent. But one of them towards the back stepped forward. "Your Highness. I understand the situation, but please be merciful. We have reason to fight him..."

His vibe was different from the other knights, and he drew his sword without taking no for an answer. Tida tried to stop him, but another man came from behind and stopped the prince. This only lasted a few seconds, but that was long enough to prevent the prince from interfering in the fight between the man and myself.

I knew he was going to attack me, so I gripped my weapon to ready myself, prepared to take on the entire group of knights. But the weight of the adamantium sword worked against me, delaying my reaction for a split second, and I was just barely able to block his attack.

"What's wrong, Tenma? You're pretty sluggish!" It seemed the man had heard of me, because he spoke in a rather kind voice for

someone who was attacking me.

At this rate, I thought he might get the best of me, so I flung my sword at him with all my might. I aimed for the exact moment he stepped in, slowing him down ever so slightly. Then I took advantage of that opportunity to pull the *kogarasumaru* from my magic bag while backing away.

“Guess we’ll just have to start over. Let’s go!” The man tried to charge me again, but as he wasn’t very fast, I easily dodged it. At that moment, I *should* have been able to get a counterattack in...

“What?!”

...but the man suddenly stopped short, making me slice through nothing but air. I quickly pulled back and swung my sword again, matching his speed.

“Tch!” He aimed his attack at me, but I leaned backwards and managed to kick the hilt of his sword, evading the attack.

The recoil from my kicking his sword made him fall back a few steps, and it was now my turn to go on the offensive. I turned my sword to one side and thrust at him twice. Meanwhile, I adjusted my posture and fired out a third shot with more power, but he easily dodged it.

He seized that opportunity to try to throw me off my stance, but I was prepared for that. And actually, I wasn’t done with my attack. The technique I was using, called a flat thrust, was said to have been used by the Shinsengumi. It was a two-stage attack where you thrust first before performing a side-sweep.

Although I’d only ever heard about the technique, the man was taken aback by it. But I was surprised to find that he stepped in faster than my slashing motion, and I ended up hitting him with just the base of my sword, so he weathered it. Then the man threw his body at me and thrust his sword towards my throat as I rolled across the ground.

And that’s when the match was decided. It was the most complete defeat I’d ever suffered since I’d gone up against my father.

“You got me.” Still lying down, I let go of the sword I was holding and raised both my hands.

“This was just happenstance. If you wanted to kill me, I’d be dead right now. That’s how close it was.” The man sheathed his sword and took my hand to pull me up. “I haven’t introduced myself yet. I’m Dean, but perhaps you’ve heard of me as your father and mother’s old companion?”

Name: Dean D. Duran

Age: 50

Class: Human

Title: Former First-Class Adventurer, Viscount,
Captain of the Royal Guard, The Royal Army's
Strongest
HP: 25000
MP: 15000
Strength: A+
Defense: S+
Agility: A
Magic: A+
Mind: S+
Growth: C+
Luck: B+
Skills
Sword: 10
Spear: 10
Brawling: 9
Rod: 8
Throwing: 8
Endurance: 8
Archery: 7
Axe: 7
Physical Boost: 7
Fire Magic: 7
Wind Magic: 7
Sensory Boost: 7
Earth Magic: 6
Dismantle Items: 6
Debuff Resistance: 6
Nightvision: 6
Vitality Boost: 6
Water Magic: 5
Combat Master: 5
Destruction Boost: 5
Cooking: 2

He'd definitely earned the title of strongest in the royal army. His abilities were very high-level, but most of all, his technique was amazing. He could read his opponent's movements and hold them in the palm of his hand.

"You could've used magic too, you know," Dean said. But since I was fighting someone with better technique than me, I felt like it would've been a waste to use magic. Although half-hearted magic probably wouldn't have worked anyway.

"No, I thought it was a waste to use magic on someone with better

technique than me... Actually, it brought me back to when my father used to train me, so I forgot all about using magic halfway through the fight.” I wondered if it was rude to say he reminded me of my father, but Dean didn’t seem to mind. In fact, it looked like it made him happy.

“Ricardo was like an older brother to me, so I feel like an uncle to you. I’m happy to hear it.”

That went over better than I expected. We chatted for a while, and then the man who had stopped Tida came over.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but where did you get that adamantium sword?” Despite his calm demeanor and tone of voice, he had a commanding aura about him. I could tell he was no small fry either.

I picked up the adamantium sword, then knelt down and offered it to him. “I got it from a shop in Gunjo City, Your Grace.”

Everyone seemed shocked by my words, except for the archduke himself and Luna. Jeanne and Aura were also surprised that the archduke had suddenly shown up, and immediately came out of the carriage and knelt down like I had. Luna still didn’t seem to realize what was going on.

“Ho ho! No need to be so polite. By the way, what makes you think I’m an archduke?” His demeanor changed entirely and now he was even more intimidating. In fact, everyone except for Dean and Luna succumbed to his aura.

“Please stop playing around, Your Grace. You’re scaring my slaves.”

The knights glared at me accusingly as if to say, “How dare you speak to him like that!” but the archduke didn’t seem to mind.

“Ah, sorry, sorry! I got a bit carried away.” With these words, he began laughing. Dean shrugged, leaving everyone except for me and Luna to stare in astonishment.

Luna still had a puzzled look on her face... She seemed to have no clue what was going on, which meant she might be the most important person here.

“So? How did you know I was the archduke?” the man asked, ignoring the crew, whose jaws were all hanging open.

“Well, there are several reasons. First, this sword doesn’t have a crest on it, so it’s just a regular high-quality sword... But it starts to mean something different once you put it together with these.” I took the adamantium armor and gauntlets I’d bought at the same time out of my magic bag.

“Oh—you have the whole set? They’re looking pretty good. That’s how you could tell?”

Although there was no crest on the sword, the armor and gauntlets had crests with a lion and a dragon on them.

“You had a reaction to the sword, so I thought it was possible... Also, there’s something else.”

“Oh?”

I took a deep breath and then glanced over at Tida. “There are only a few people capable of stopping a prince, and who have the same air as the king,” I explained.

The archduke looked satisfied by this, and laughed out loud.

“Ha ha, you certainly are just as His Majesty described you! A very interesting fellow, indeed. By the way, didn’t you have any other weapons on you?”

“These?” This time, I took out my mythril shortsword and orichalcum knife.

“Yes, that’s right. How much would you sell them to me for?” he asked in a straightforward tone.

I thought about it quickly. “I can let you have the adamantium items, but I don’t think you need the shortsword or the knife.”

Everyone except for me, the archduke, Dean, and Luna broke out into a cold sweat.

“For the same reason?”

It felt like the air temperature around us had dropped, but I wasn’t afraid to answer him honestly. “The archduke’s crest is on the adamantium equipment, but there’s nothing on the shortsword or knife to prove ownership. Therefore, I should be the rightful owner.”

After I finished saying that, the archduke and I stared at each other for a few moments. Everyone around us was silent, intimidated by his aura. Jeanne and Aura, who stood behind me, were completely frozen, and Shiromaru had begun to display a cautious attitude towards the archduke after sensing the mood in the air.

“Hrm... I suppose you’re right. I’m sorry for being unreasonable.” However, he gave up on it surprisingly quickly, so I had no ill will towards him. Those around us, who had been rather tense, all let out sighs of relief.

“It’s fine. By the way, how much would you pay for the adamantium equipment?”

“Hrm... Dean, what do you think it’s worth at market value?”

I had a hard time believing that Dean would know if neither of us did, and as it turned out, I appeared to be right on that point. “I’m not sure, but I doubt it would be worth as much as a platinum coin. But it’s possible he added value to it... Why don’t you ask an expert once we get to the capital?” he asked.

“Yes, I think I’ll do that.”

And thus it was decided that I would hang onto the equipment until then.

“Now, let’s go back to the capital. Tida, Luna!”

“Y-Yes!”

“What is it?”

The archduke called the two of them over. “You’re going to have a lecture waiting for you when you get home!” he said. He was about to get into his carriage when he looked over at me instead. “Hey, Tenma. Sorry, but could you let these youngsters ride in your carriage? I can’t ever relax when they ride with me.”

I didn’t have any particular reason to say no, so I agreed. Then I asked what he wanted to do with their carriage, which had been destroyed.

“Well, as it’s broken, we’ll just leave several people here with it. I’ll send some craftsmen from the capital to repair it.”

I suppose it made sense that they couldn’t just leave a carriage with the royal crest lying around somewhere, but I had room in my magic bag. “I can put it in my magic bag if you want,” I offered. I walked over to the carriage, picked it up, and stowed it in the bag. The archduke and Dean looked shocked.

“Amazing... How much did that thing cost?” the archduke asked.

I was fiddling with my bag, and didn’t put much thought into my answer. “Oh, I made it myself, so it’s probably not even worth 100G,” I blurted out. Both the archduke and Dean froze, but by the time I realized it, it was already too late.

“You...made that yourself?”

“To think that you made that... You could search this whole kingdom—no, this whole continent over—and never find a craftsman who could make an item of that class!”

It was something I’d just thrown together in my spare time, so maybe I had been too nonchalant about its value. Under normal circumstances, you might discover a magic bag from a large dungeon, or a first-rate craftsman would work in conjunction with a sorcerer over a period of many days to make one. It would be impossible for most fifteen-year-old kids to make one by themselves.

It was too late to say I was joking, but at this rate I didn’t want to get myself in trouble over it.

There was a strange feeling in the air between the three of us.

“I think I might be getting hard of hearing in my old age... That must be it,” the archduke said abruptly.

“I had a bug in my ear, so I didn’t hear a thing,” Dean agreed.

“So? You say you got your hands on that magic bag in a dungeon, did you? That was lucky!”

Fortunately for me, only the archduke and Dean were nearby. None of the knights had heard a thing.

“Yes. I was very lucky.” I played along with the two of them, which made me feel like I was part of some bad classroom skit, but at

least I'd escaped this one unscathed.

I left their side and walked back over to Jeanne and the others, where Tida and Luna were already waiting.

"Um, I'm Tida von Blumere Krastin. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Tenma."

"I'm Luna von Blumere Krastin. Nice to meet you."

Royals certainly liked to introduce themselves a lot, and once they'd gotten it over with, I decided I might as well follow suit. I told them about how Jeanne and Aura were my slaves, and that Shiromaru would be riding inside the carriage with us as well. I took my usual carriage out of my bag, and hitched Valley Wind up to it.

Tida and Luna looked surprised, but that was just because I had pulled a carriage out of my bag. The archduke and Dean were plainly acting as though they couldn't even see my bag anymore.

"Well, shall we be off?"

I instructed Valley Wind (via Rocket) to head to the capital, and invited Tida and Luna inside the carriage.

"Pardon us... Huh?!"

"Excuse us... Wha?!"

Tida and Luna both let out cries of shock once they'd entered the carriage. Tida looked stunned, while Luna brimmed with curiosity.

"Don't just stand in the doorway. Take a seat." I was already inside, and motioned for them to sit down.

"R-Right!"

"Okay!"

The two of them sat down and Aura promptly served them tea and snacks. Once she was done, she joined Jeanne and sat behind me.

"Jeanne, Aura, you two sit over there. Tida and Luna, you don't mind, right?"

I had no intention of giving them special treatment just because they were royals. They were younger than me, and maybe it was because of what had just happened, but I simply couldn't bring myself to treat them with respect. Of course, it was a different story with the archduke, though.

I had Jeanne and Aura sit next to me, while Tida and Luna sat diagonally across from me.

"I can't, Master Tenma. I couldn't possibly sit near members of the royal family! I'm a slave and a maid!"

"I can't do it either, Tenma! It's way too rude to the royal family!"

Both of them declined, but I wasn't going to hear of it—not only for their sakes, but it was important for me that Tida and Luna understand my place, especially since Tida would one day inherit the throne.

In other words, I wanted to make it clear that I was powerful

enough that I had no intention of yielding to authority, while also issuing a threat: "If you try to force me to do anything, prepare for the consequences." Although it seemed that the latter had already been imprinted upon them by the king.

"Don't worry about it. Right now, they're just kids riding in my carriage. Just relax," I said, forcing Jeanne and Aura to sit down. They still seemed extremely nervous, but Tida and Luna didn't say a word; they didn't seem peeved by this either. I'd partly done this to gauge their responses—either they truly weren't bothered by it, or they were skilled enough at not allowing their discomfort to show on their faces.

"By the way, which minister was it who duped you two?"

Currently, the structure of the kingdom's government had the king at the top, followed by the king's assistants, the prime minister, various ministers, assistants to these ministers, and departments.

The king's assistants weren't exactly higher up on the totem pole than the prime minister, but since they sometimes acted as the king's representative, their position was technically higher. Well—most of them were candidates for being the next king, so that was probably another reason they could be considered higher ranked.

After that, there were four ministerial posts: the Minister of Military Affairs, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Internal Affairs, each with their related departments. This information could be easily obtained by going to the city library.

"The Minister of Internal Affairs, Kyzen von Durham."

"He's a fat, bald old guy."

From their answers, I had learned two things. One: the person who'd duped them was the Minister of Internal Affairs, whose name was Kyzen von Durham. Kyzen had pointed out their lack of combat experience (Tida especially) and told them where the baby cows were. He'd also told them it was okay to kill the cows because there were too many of them, and their numbers needed to be reduced.

The second thing I learned was that he was fat, bald, and ogled women, and as such was very unpopular with them—in fact, according to Luna, he was the most unpopular man in the castle. He was especially disliked by the Minister of Military Affairs and the Minister of Finance.

"I see... Well, that's not really enough for me to tell what kind of person he is, but I guess it's really none of my business anyway."

Tida and Luna seemed to have warmed up to me a considerable amount as they munched on their snacks. And Jeanne and Aura didn't seem to be as tense as before either.

"Um, Tenma... Did I see some kind of bird flying around you before?" Tida asked, swiveling his head all around to look. Luna

followed suit, doing the same.

“Oh—are you talking about Solomon? Come out, Solomon.” I thought it wouldn’t hurt to show them, so I called Solomon out of my bag. He didn’t like chaotic situations and had gone into the bag on his own earlier.

“Squee?”

“Huh?!”

“Eek! He’s sooo cute!”

Solomon poked his head out from the bag. Tida was frozen with shock and Luna squealed with delight.

Solomon darted out and clung onto my head. This made Luna even more excited. She reached out to touch Solomon, but he deftly dodged.

At this, Tida quickly grabbed Luna’s arms to stop her. “Luna! Do you have any idea what would happen if you made a dragon angry?! Calm down!”

Luna reluctantly nodded and returned to her seat, but she continued staring at Solomon intently.

“As long as you don’t do anything mean to him, Solomon won’t get angry. Say hello, Solomon.” I held Solomon out to Luna.

He looked at the two of them, said, “Squee!” then sat beside Luna.

“Eek, he’s sooo cute! Let me have him, Tida!”

“No.” Tida immediately shot down his sister’s request.

Solomon left Luna’s side and went over to Jeanne. Jeanne picked Solomon up, while Shiromaru stood in front of Jeanne, blocking him from Luna.

“Luna, don’t be ridiculous! What if you make Solomon mad and he eats you up?! I’m sorry about this, Tenma. I’ll make sure Luna never does it again, so please forgive her.”

Judging by Tida’s behavior, it didn’t seem like I had to prove my point anymore. Then again, I shouldn’t let them off too easily.

“Luna, what would you do if someone said, ‘Let me have your mom or dad!’ Would you give your parents to them?”

Luna thought about it for a few moments and then shook her head. “I’m sorry!” She apologized. I gave her a pat on the head. When Solomon saw that, he flew back over to her.

“Listen, Luna. I know that you think Solomon is cute, but don’t forget that he’s a dragon. If you do something he doesn’t like, you’ll suffer the consequences, and they won’t be pretty. It’s the same for any other living creature, including humans. You need to remember that. Know that if you do something a living creature won’t like, you’re risking your life.”

I glanced over at Tida, who was listening carefully to my words and seemed deep in thought.

After that, we spent a pleasant time together inside the carriage until suddenly there was a commotion outside. A horse ran up alongside our carriage.

“What happened?”

Dean was the one on the horse, and he looked at me with a frown. “We’ve got trouble. We’ve spotted a large group of wolves. We think they must’ve smelled the cow’s blood on the carriage.”

I leaned outside the carriage window and looked for the wolves, spotting five or six wolves about fifty meters away.

“The wolves are black and about one and a half to two meters long. They must be direwolves—rank D wolves,” I said.

“Yes. If there are only a few of them, they’re Rank D. Ten or more will make them Rank C, though, and twenty or more makes them Rank B. They’re very dangerous wolves.”

Dean was right: direwolves were easy to defeat if there were only a few of them, but the larger the pack, the more dangerous they were. Even though they were animals and not monsters, the guild treated them as monsters because they were so dangerous.

“I think several packs have joined up. Their numbers would make it a Rank A or higher quest, and very difficult to defeat. Tenma, would you mind helping me?” Dean asked, about to return to the knights to formulate a battle plan.

“Shiromaru can take care of the wolves himself. Shiromaru. Go play,” I said. I took off his collar so that he became his actual size and sent him outside. He spotted the pack of direwolves and ran after them, tail wagging.

“That’s Shiromaru? Why does he look so much bigger?”

“This collar is a magic item. I got it in a dungeon, and I have Shiromaru wear it because it’s convenient.”

Everyone, including Dean, was watching Shiromaru. Even though Jeanne and Aura were familiar with him, they still looked surprised by his transformation. Shiromaru paid them no heed and kept running after the wolves. The direwolves hadn’t anticipated a wolf who was much bigger and stronger than them coming after them, and they scattered like spiders, running all over the place.

“Oh—it looks like Shiromaru has pinned down the leader of the wolf pack. I’m going to go check it out.”

I was about to use flying magic to go check on Shiromaru when I noticed Tida was trying to say something. However, I pretended not to notice and flew off to Shiromaru anyway.

“Good job, Shiromaru. Hold him down like that for a while.” I patted Shiromaru on the head and took a peek at the direwolf he was holding captive. The wolf started growling to threaten me, but I grabbed its muzzle with both hands and glared back at it with as

much malice as I could muster.

Its growls turned into frightened whines just like that, and it managed to roll onto its back to show its belly in an attempt to appear less threatening.

“Shiromaru, you can let it go,” I said. But even after he did this, the wolf still lay on its back with its stomach exposed. “It’s okay. I’m not angry anymore. You can get up.” I said, rubbing the wolf’s belly. The wolf looked at me carefully and then obediently flipped over, lying down the way it normally would.

The other wolves seemed cautious of me and Shiromaru, looking on from afar. I took a few steps backwards so I could run away at any time.

“Are you hungry? Share this with your pack.” I took three cows out of my bag and set them down on the ground where the wolves could see. The leader gave me a puzzled look, but once he realized I meant him no harm, he immediately stood up and began sniffing the cows.

I was about to go back to the carriage when I saw Shiromaru sniffing the cow with the rest of the wolves. “Shiromaru, let’s go! That’s for the wolves! Don’t worry, I have yours in my bag.”

Shiromaru whined and didn’t seem to want to move away, though, so I put his collar on him to shrink him and picked him up, then used flying magic to return to the carriage. Shiromaru made pained noises the whole time, but I ignored him.

“I’m back, Dean. I think the wolves are fine now—we can continue.”

Dean looked surprised, but I ignored his reaction and went inside the carriage. He let out a sigh and then went back to the other knights so we could proceed.

The first thing I did after I got back inside the carriage was give Shiromaru a cow horn. I gave one to Solomon too, but they looked so happy as they munched on them that I thought they might beg for more.

“Um, Tenma? Why did you give the wolves those cows?” Tida asked, sounding puzzled.

“Tida—in a way, those wolves are your victims. Dozens of cows are gone from that area now, which means a big chunk of their food source is gone. Thus, it’s only natural for me to give them the cows.”

“Oh, I see!” Tida accepted that answer.

But honestly, I’d thought the wolves were cute and wanted to win their favor. That was the main reason I’d given them the cows. But what I’d told Tida was also true, so I kept the other reason to myself.

After that, the trip went fairly smoothly. We arrived near the capital in less than half a day.

“Shiromaru, let’s get some exercise before we go into the capital. Go on!” I wanted to have Shiromaru run as much as I could before we arrived in the city, so I opened the carriage door and let him out.

As the knights seemed puzzled, I explained to them that Shiromaru would have to spend a lot of time being good inside the city, and it was best to get all of his energy out now. They understood this.

“Shiromaru, don’t stray too far! And if you see any strangers, come back right away!”

“Wuff!” Shiromaru said in response, before cheerfully running away.

Solomon wanted to go outside too, but I hadn’t told the knights about my dragon yet, and I didn’t want to cause an unnecessary commotion. I told him he had to wait inside the carriage.

“Wow, he’s so fast! Shiro’s got so much energy!”

Shiromaru ran around the carriage in circles, and sometimes he would even go faster than the knights, or play with little animals like rabbits.

Luna was excited to see this and cheered him on.

“Hey, Shiromaru! Where are you going?”

Suddenly, Shiromaru changed directions and started running at full speed. There was a carriage up ahead, and it seemed like he was headed that way. The people in the carriage seemed flustered by Shiromaru’s sudden approach, but for some reason it didn’t stop.

“Oh, no! They might think he’s an enemy and try to attack him!” I quickly exited the carriage and flew towards Shiromaru.

Part Three

“Master Merlin! A wolf is heading straight for us at full speed!”

Hearing this, I thought there were certainly stupid wolves out there. I wondered what it could possibly be thinking—one wolf couldn’t take all of us.

But then I thought perhaps the wolf was heading towards us because it *did* think it could take us. I decided to take a look at it, just in case.

“What in the world?! That thing certainly has a lot of magical energy! Don’t let down your guards, everyone! This is a very strong enemy!”

I could tell from one glance that it was no ordinary wolf. I told the knights as much and they all assumed offensive stances, but then I realized something and stopped them. “Hm? Wait, is that...? Everyone! Don’t attack! That’s Shiromaru!”

Once he got close enough, I saw the color of his fur and sensed a familiar magical energy. I thought it was very possible that this was Shiromaru.

“Huh? Is it really Shiromaru?” Kriss exclaimed with surprise. Edgar looked shocked as well.

“That’s what it seems like. Look! He’s wagging his tail! He’s not coming to attack!” I couldn’t bear it any longer and flew out towards Shiromaru. Edgar and the others frantically chased after me, but I reached Shiromaru first.

“Shiromaru, where’s Tenm—? Oof!” Shiromaru charged and knocked me over, tossing me through the air.



“Oh, no! Shiromaru knocked someone into the air!” At first glance, I thought that Shiromaru might’ve killed them. And he certainly might have, had he been his actual size and ran into someone at that same speed. At the very least, he could have broken all the bones in the person’s body.

“Please be alive, whoever you are!” As I got closer, I saw that the person was still breathing. He had been flung into a muddy patch of grass, sticking into it headfirst like some kind of visual manga gag. Honestly, I thanked the gods—well, I wasn’t sure which one to thank in this situation specifically, so I thanked the god of death—that this person’s body was stronger than most. Thank you, God of Death, for not taking this person yet! But then I imagined the god of death glaring at me, and silently apologized to him.

“Shiromaru! Why in the world did you do that?! Excuse me, but are you okay?” I ran over to the mud-covered victim and apologized.

“Tenma...”

“Tenma!”

Suddenly, I heard people calling my name. I turned in their direction and saw the carriage approaching. Beside it were two knights on horseback, calling my name and waving to me.

“You’re, um...” They looked familiar, but I couldn’t remember their names. Shiromaru must have, though, because he was wagging his tail as he waited for them. I tried hard to remember while the two knights caught up to me and slid off their horses.

“You’re really alive! I’m so glad!”

“I’m so happy! It’s been a long time!”

As the two of them greeted me in a friendly manner, it finally clicked who they were. “You’re part of the king’s guard. Edgar, and... Kriss?”

They nodded, reaching out to pat my head.

“That’s right! I’m Edgar! I’m so glad you’re safe and sound and we got to see you again!”

“So am I...”

They both looked thrilled to see me again and had faint tears in their eyes.

“What are you two doing here, anyway?”

“We’ve been searching for you along with Master Merlin... By the way, where is Master Merlin...?”

“Yeah, he flew ahead of us...”

Just then, I remembered the person Shiromaru had knocked over and sent flying. “Don’t tell me that’s you, Gramps?!” I rushed over and

pulled the person out of the mud puddle. Lo and behold, it was the sage Merlin. “Gramps! Don’t die!” I quickly cast recovery magic on him and made him spit out the mud in his mouth, somehow managing to get him to open his eyes.

“Tenma... Tenma, is that you?! I finally found you... Tenma...!” The moment he saw me, he burst into tears and hugged me.

“Gramps, you reek...” I plugged my nose to escape from his foul odor and backed away from him.

“Th-That’s what you have to say during our emotional reunion?! Oof!” He began to complain, but once he caught a whiff of his clothes, he plugged his nose and started stripping. Only then did I realize he hadn’t fallen into a mud puddle at all, but a huge pile of animal dung.

Gramps quickly cast Water magic on himself, washing the poo off with a ball of water. I tossed a bar of soap into the ball of water to lather it up and washed my hands with it as well.

“Hey, Tenma!” While I was washing my hands, I heard a familiar voice coming from the carriage Edgar and Kriss had left behind.

“Uncle Mark! I didn’t know you were here too!”

Uncle Mark got out of the carriage and ran over to hug me. “I’m so relieved you’re still alive!” he said over and over again with tears running down his face.

“Hey! Mark, don’t interrupt my emotional reunion with Tenma!” Gramps had finished washing, and his voice boomed all around. Uncle Mark looked confused, but Edgar whispered something in his ear about Gramps, and then Uncle Mark understood that he had hugged me before Gramps, so he bowed his head repeatedly and apologized.

“Anyway, I’m so glad that you’re alive, Tenma! By the way, what have you been doing since you slew that dragon zombie?” Gramps asked me, after he had thoroughly lectured Uncle Mark and hugged me for real.

I told Gramps how, although I’d slain the dragon, I fell unconscious afterwards, and Rocket and Shiromaru carried me to a safe place. I remained unconscious for several days, and when I woke up I thought everyone had died. I was too afraid to go back and check, and decided to go on a journey. I’d spent about two years in Gunjo City, living as an adventurer. Recently, I’d moved to Sagan, where I was trying my hand at dungeon diving.

I added some dramatic flair to my story, but the part about thinking everyone had died after the dragon zombie attack and being too scared to check for their bodies was true.

“I met some adventurers in Sagan who told me about a tournament in the capital. I thought I’d go participate and also ask people about Kukuri Village.”

“I see... Well, at any rate, I’m so glad we finally found each other!

We'll never have to be apart again!"

"Oh, but once the tournament is over, I'm going to go back to Sagan and continue dungeon diving. I'm renting an apartment there too," I told Gramps, who looked like he just remembered something.

"Come to think of it, you have an apprentice back in Sagan, don't you? All right, then! I'll go back there with you!" he declared. I noticed Edgar and Kriss smirking behind Gramps. I was surprised that Gramps knew about Amy, but it made sense once they told me they'd traveled there trying to find me.

"At any rate, Master Merlin, let's go to the capital first," Edgar said, opening the carriage door for him.

"I'm going to ride in Tenma's carriage! Let's go, Tenma." He tugged on my hand and was about to use flying magic to return to my carriage. "Edgar, Kriss, Mark! We'll go on ahead of you! Shiromaru, don't be late!" And so he left his carriage behind and flew towards my own.

I was left hanging in the air, so I used magic myself to fly after him. I looked back and saw Edgar and the others frantically chasing after us. I arrived back at the carriage not long afterwards. Just as Gramps was about to go inside, another carriage pulled up alongside us. It was the archduke's.

"What's this? You *are* alive, Merlin!"

"You've got some nerve, pissy pants!"

For some reason, the two of them started arguing. I had no idea what was going on, but their insults only grew worse.

"I think that's eno—" Dean tried to intervene.

"You be quiet!" they both shouted in unison, pushing him aside to continue their quarrel.

Dean gave me a look, so I said, "Gramps, calm down!"

"Please settle down, Your Grace!"

I went behind Gramps and Dean went behind the archduke, having to physically pry them away from each other.

"S-Stop that, Tenma!"

"Let me go, Dean!"

They both resisted, but since we were holding their arms behind their backs, they couldn't move.

"You know the archduke, Gramps?" I asked.

He frowned. "I wish I didn't! You don't have to call him the archduke, Tenma! You can just call him a good-for-nothing pissy pants!"

"He is an archduke in this kingdom, so I'm definitely not going to do that..." I muttered back.

"Who are you calling a pissy pants, you pervert?!" the archduke shouted from ten meters away.

“It’s true, isn’t it?! Did you forget what happened back at magic school?! Or have you just gone senile?!”

“For the hundredth time, I fell in a puddle and got my pants wet! *You’re* the ones who ran into the girls’ bathroom naked!”

“That was an accident! A spell backfired, and the recoil pushed me right into the girls’ bathroom! It wasn’t even bath time, so that’s proof!”

Their quarrel had now gone into the territory of airing each other’s dirty laundry, much to the horror of the bystanders. By the time Edgar and the others caught up with us, things had gotten even worse.

“You two need to cool off!” I jumped away from Gramps and cast Water magic on both him and the archduke, making a globe of water splash onto both their heads. Dean backed away from the archduke the moment I jumped away from Gramps, so he didn’t get hit.

“Cold cold *cold!*” Both of them yelled in unison. That’s right—I’d made sure the water was ice cold, and they finally stopped fighting.

“What’d you do that for, Tenma?!”

“I’m an archduke, you know!”

“What’s a sage and a nobleman doing embarrassing each other in public?! The knights are all beside themselves!”

The two of them looked around, and the knights immediately averted their gazes.

“Anyway, please get into the carriage.” I opened the door to my carriage. Jeanne and Aura, who had been watching this whole scene, hurriedly got back into their seats.

“I suppose we can call a truce for now.”

“Let’s go inside, then.”

The two of them agreed and immediately went inside.

“Tenma, don’t forget that he *is* the archduke, so please be careful,” Dean said as he lightly clapped me on the shoulder. Edgar and the others all took up their positions around my carriage. I gave the signal to Dean, and then instructed Valley Wind to start moving.

During this entire argument, Kriss was too preoccupied with petting Shiromaru to notice anything was happening, and was subsequently lectured by Dean.

“Tenma, why do we have to ride along with this old geezer?” Gramps had done nothing but complain ever since we’d set off.

“If you don’t like it, you’re free to leave! Lucky for you, you can fly!”

Then they began arguing again. But the moment it started, I created a small ball of ice in each of my hands, then shoved them down the back of Gramps’s and the archduke’s shirts.

“Cold, cold, cold!”

“That’s enough, you two.”

They both nodded, writhing in agony.

Tida had a conflicted look on his face as he gazed at the two of them. He must have had some lofty impressions of them which had now crumbled before his eyes, which seemed to have left him a little confused.

Meanwhile, Luna asked Aura for another cup of tea as she stuffed her face with snacks. However, Aura and Jeanne were so baffled by the true nature of the esteemed archduke and sage that they were frozen, which left me with the job of getting Luna more tea.

“By the way, Tenma... I’ve been wondering about this, but are these two your slaves?” Gramps asked, having regained his composure after the ice had melted. Apparently he’d heard in Sagan that I had slaves, and guessed that these were the girls in question.

At the same time, the archduke looked at Jeanne. “Is that white-haired girl the daughter of Viscount Armelia?” he asked.

Jeanne’s and Aura’s faces tightened at the mention of this name. The archduke took that to be an affirmative answer and turned towards me. “Tenma, will you let me have them?” he asked abruptly.

“There’s the door, Archduke.” With no further questions for him, I pointed at the door, indicating he could go.

“Yeah, go on and get out! Or else we’ll throw you out!” Gramps agreed, urging him to leave.

“W-Wait, Tenma! Hear me out!”

However, Gramps reacted faster than I did. “I’m sure you just want a young mistress! You perverted old geezer!”

Jeanne and Aura crossed their arms over their chests and hid behind me.

“Great Uncle...” Tida said with sadness in his eyes.

“...Pervert.” It seemed Luna knew what a “mistress” was. I supposed that was only natural since she was a member of the royal family—I had just assumed she wouldn’t know what the word meant.

As the two children stared at him, the archduke began to panic. “Wait, wait! This is all a misunderstanding! I’m devoted to my late wife!”

“What are you talking about?”

The archduke looked uncomfortable at the hostility in my voice, and with everyone’s eyes on him. All the same, he uttered a name. “Baronet Podro il Chloride.”

I’d heard that name somewhere before... However, he hadn’t seemed very important at the time, so I’d quickly forgotten half—okay, most of—everything I’d been told about him. Both Jeanne and Aura frowned. It was clear they didn’t want to remember him.

“What about him?”

“There are three factions in this kingdom: the royalists, which includes the royal family and the hereditary nobles; the reformists, centered around the Minister of Internal Affairs and various dukes; and the neutral faction, which includes the prime minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and those who don’t belong in either of the other factions.” The archduke gave us this explanation about the factions.

The royalists were just as the name implied—they believed that the royal family should have control, and that the nobles around the royal family should support them. Most of the members of this faction were very old aristocratic families.

The reformists were mostly newly minted nobles, who believed that the royal family’s power was more symbolic, and that the power to make decisions should lie in the hands of those chosen to represent the kingdom.

The neutral faction consisted of those who didn’t belong to either the royalists or the reformists; in other words, most of them were noncommittal. Some shared the prime minister’s belief, which was that those working in public service should abandon their selfish desires, while others aligned with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who believed in going to war with other countries.

Currently, the reformist faction was more than twice as powerful as the neutral faction, and the royalist faction was nearly twice as powerful as the reformists. The royalist faction was dominant, but they still weren’t in a position to let down their guard.

By the way, the king’s assistant was the prince, and the Minister of Finance and Minister of Military Affairs were the king’s second and third sons, respectively. Obviously, they all belonged to the royalists.

The problem was that Baronet Podro il Chloride was a reformist and a protégé of the duke, who was the heart of the organization.

“Why are you telling me all this?” I asked.

“We want to get everyone who could strengthen the reformists militarily on our side. Especially if they’re valuable.”

I asked him for more details, and he told me that Jeanne’s father, the viscount Armelia, belonged to the neutral faction. He connected all the lower-ranked nobles who belonged to that faction. Thus, if his daughter joined the reformists, it was highly possible that some nobles in the neutral faction might do the same.

Conversely, if Jeanne was recruited to the royalists, those nobles might again follow her, which is why the archduke wanted me to hand her over.

“So? Will you?”

“That’s up to Jeanne and Aura...but I can tell they don’t want to, so I’ll have to say no.” Halfway through my sentence, I glanced over at

the girls, and they both shook their heads.

“Hrm... Well then, will you join the royalists yourself?”

“I’m an adventurer and I really hate trouble. Plus, I’m not a noble...”

The archduke smirked when he heard my last sentence. “Oh, don’t worry about that. You’ve racked up enough achievements to deserve a noble rank!”

“Huh?”

Ignoring my confusion, he began listing reasons why I deserved to become a noble. “First of all, you saved the king five years ago. That alone would earn you the rank of honorary noble. Secondly, you defeated a dragon zombie virtually by yourself. If not for that, we could have had a national crisis on our hands. Again, you deserve a title of nobility for that. Finally, you saved the grandson of the crown prince, Tida. Add that to the fact that you saved His Majesty, and you certainly deserve an honorary title. Furthermore, although it was an abominable mistake, Merlin is famous as a sage. It might be strange to give his grandson a title, but I believe such a move will be popular with the citizenry... Strange as it may seem.”

He continued to speak, breezing past the surprise of everyone except Gramps and Luna. “Come to think of it, I think the title of viscount would suit you. And if you rack up a few more achievements after that, you might be able to call yourself a count! If you get that far, surely a duke’s family will approach you about marrying their daughter!”

“I highly doubt I can become a count. And I really doubt any duke is going to ask me to marry their...”

“Lady Primera of the Duke Sanga,” the archduke muttered before I could finish my sentence.

Gramps immediately reacted to that. “Speaking of which, Tenma, I met quite a few of your female acquaintances in Gunjo City. There were the three catgirl triplets, the vice-guildmaster, the woman you saved from the bandits, and Lady Primera...” He casually counted them off on his fingers. Meanwhile, I felt a strange, overwhelming aura behind me.

“Hm? Wh-What the...?”

Everyone else sensed the tension too, and all of a sudden, Jeanne and Aura were standing behind Gramps. For some reason, the two girls began to introduce themselves.

“Master Merlin, please forgive the late introduction. I am Master Tenma’s maid and slave Aura. Master Tenma saved my and Jeanne’s lives.”

“Hello, Master Merlin. My name is Jeanne. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

And then Aura dropped this bomb. “Actually, Jeanne and I are both candidates for marrying Master Tenma. Master Tenma is, of course, aware of this as well. So, for all intents and purposes, you may think of us as his fiancées.”

Before I could react to Aura’s complete fabrication, Gramps responded with excitement. “Well, congratulations are in order, then! I can’t wait to see my great-grandchildren!”

I opened my mouth to object, but the archduke piped up. “Well, I don’t have a problem with that. This will even make it easier for the royalists to have their long-lost reminder of Viscount Armelia get together with Tenma!” he said with a laugh.

“Congratulations, Tenma. So that’s why you wanted them to sit next to you!”

“Congratulations, everyone!”

Now even Tida and Luna were falling for her ruse, closing off further escape routes for me.

At this point, it would be very difficult to tell them I’d never considered Jeanne a potential bride. I glared at Aura and she smiled faintly at me. Her villainous personality was giving me a headache.

Just then, the archduke seemed to remember something. “By the by, your older sister is working in the royal capital.”

The color drained from Aura’s face.

“My sister...?” she said, her voice trembling. Her reaction was so strange that I asked Jeanne about Aura’s sister in a whisper, but Jeanne just shook her head.

“I haven’t heard much about Aura’s sister. Aura was the daughter of a maid who worked at my house when I was little, and we often played together. One day, she became my maid. And for some reason, her older sister just wasn’t there anymore.”

The whole time Jeanne was speaking, Aura didn’t stop trembling. Her face was pale, and she was covered in cold sweat. Suddenly she turned to me and said, “M-Master Tenma, may I return to Sagan alone? I mean... I’m not asking permission. I’m going!” She lunged towards the door and flung it open, ready to jump out, but I managed to grab her and drag her back inside the carriage in the nick of time.

“Ngh!”

She let out a strangled cry since I had to grab her by the back of the collar, then collapsed limply against my body and lost consciousness.

“That was close... Jeanne, I’m going to put her in bed. Can you get it ready? Oof...” I had Jeanne lay out the futon while I carried Aura over. Although me carrying her in my arms might have sounded romantic, because her head was lolling from side to side and she was pale as a sheet, it mainly looked like I was dragging around a passed-

out drunk.

“There.” I put her in bed and told Jeanne to take care of her. Then I returned to my seat, picking up the conversation where we had left off as if nothing had happened. “So? What’s Aura’s older sister like?”

The archduke paused thoughtfully for a moment. “Aina is an exceptional maid...in many ways.” He muttered that last part, which made me curious about what that was supposed to mean.

Apparently, Aura’s sister’s name was Aina. I proceeded to ask Tida and Luna about her.

“Oh, so Aina is Aura’s older sister? I suppose to sum it up, I’d say she’s an incredible maid.”

“Aina’s really pretty! She’s super popular with all the men who come to the castle! And she’s really strong too!”

That explained why Aura had turned out the way she did.

At any rate, I’d see her soon enough, and I was looking forward to it. In the meantime, we chatted about what had happened since I’d left Kukuri Village. Luna was full and went to take a nap in bed. We discussed the martial arts tournament, and Tida asked me lots of questions about Solomon.

I showed Solomon off to Gramps and the archduke. The archduke gave a shout of surprise, and everyone in the carriage gathered around to make a huge fuss over Solomon. This woke Luna up and she chewed everyone out.

Having already heard about Solomon, Gramps wasn’t that taken aback. Instead, he started bragging about me. This led to another round of name-calling, after which they were yelled at by Luna again.

She cheered up when she got to hold Solomon. But even after all that commotion, Aura still didn’t wake. She just muttered things in her sleep from time to time, such as “S-Stop it, Sis...!” and “P-Please forgive me, Sis! Don’t break my arm!”

Part Four

It was starting to get dark by the time we arrived at the capital. The capital city was surrounded by walls about ten meters high, and was about one hundred kilometers from east to west, and eighty kilometers north to south. The population numbered around six hundred thousand. Seventy percent of the populace were humans, while demi-humans (including beastfolk, elves, and dwarves) made up a surprising thirty percent.

There were internal walls within the city too, with the castle at the middle of it all. These walls separated the districts starting at five kilometers out from the center, then ten, twenty, and thirty kilometers, respectively. They'd been used during wartime, and were a remnant of when the castle town was expanded in line with the development of the royal capital. At present, they were merely used as a means of dividing districts. The district closest to the castle mainly contained the mansions of nobles of the titles of counts and above. The next district contained the homes of wealthy lower nobles, and other wealthy folk who had a connection to nobles. After that came the ordinary lower nobles, wealthy people, luxury inns, and so on. Commoners lived in the outermost district.

However, this was only a guideline—it was possible for ordinary people to build a house next to a nobleman's mansion if they had the money and there was available land. But the five-kilometer radius around the castle was strictly reserved for nobles, and the closer to the castle you went, the higher annual taxes were, so households naturally segregated themselves. Also, some newly minted nobles or nobles who were trying to advance their social status could not find vacancies in their designated districts. As such, these days, more and more ordinary households ended up having noblemen living next door.

By the way, there were workshops and other places of craftsmanship in the inner districts, but since such facilities made a lot of noise, they were strictly regulated. And since soundproofing required a lot of money, the goods produced by these workshops were very expensive. For that reason, the farther you went inside, the more valuable things were, whether that meant people, shops, or goods. And of course, some things were just expensive for no reason.

There were large gates on each of the north, south, east, and west sides of the wall, which had been built to make it easier for troops to sortie during wartime. They were about thirty meters wide and had many guards, but were rarely used nowadays, and even then only for occasional military drills and national events. The main reason for this

was that it took a lot of effort to open and close the gates, which meant the costs associated with using them were also very high.

There were other doorways on the outer wall positioned at regular intervals. This one was about five to fifteen meters wide and had a drawbridge and a hinged door.

There were typically two to three guards stationed at each gate, but depending on the location, the gate might be completely closed, which meant you'd have to find one that was open. In addition, as there were gates that hadn't been opened for several years, it was a good idea to remember the several gates where guards were actually stationed.

People entering the capital were subject to a simple identity check, and those who did not have a citizenship card would be taxed according to the length of stay, so it was necessary to pay in advance. If you produced a temporary citizenship card issued after paying the bill to the government office, half of the tax paid at the gate would be refunded. The temporary citizenship card was valid for three months, and during that time you would not be taxed when you entered or left the capital. However, if you didn't pay additional tax before the deadline, you would be fined and if it was judged to have been an intentional act, you would be jailed.

In addition, upon losing your citizenship card, you had to immediately notify the government office to request it to be reissued. A replacement card was 500G, but if they found out you were buying or selling such cards, you'd be fined or exiled. In the worst case, the death penalty was possible. However, that usually didn't happen unless there was a reason such as deliberately selling citizens' votes to a bad person, with violent crime happening as a result. In the past fifty years, no one had ever been *publicly* executed in the capital.

It seemed like they preferred to sentence people to slavery—either to do maintenance work, or to develop the royal capital's suburbs. In other words, if a slave happened to die by accident or disease while working as a slave, that wasn't technically a death sentence. What's more, it seemed that there was special magic used only on slaves which prevented them from killing or harming themselves, and this magic was used on all the slaves in the capital.

Our party was given the highest priority by the guards when they saw the archduke's crest as we passed through the gate. Actually, though, we had the archduke, prince and princess, and the sage all riding in the same carriage. The guards couldn't ask them to prove their identities, nor did they have the guts to, so they let us pass after just seeing the crest.

"Dean, keep heading towards the royal castle," the archduke said to Dean.

The castle was located near the center of the royal capital, about forty kilometers from the gate, which was less than two hours by carriage.

Gramps didn't seem to like that idea. "In that case, I think you, Tida, and Luna should change carriages here. The castle is too much of a pain, so I'll go home with Tenma and the others."

"That's what you're going to do?! You know when you return to the capital, you have to go greet His Majesty!"

They started arguing again. Well, Gramps was right. It would be troublesome to go to the castle and see the king at this hour, but I thought about when I'd met him in Kukuri Village.

"Gramps, I know it's a pain, but if we don't go now, you know that the king will launch a surprise attack in the middle of the night. It's truly, truly a pain, but we have no choice but to go see him right now."

Gramps groaned and relented, but he looked really upset about it. By the way, the reason I said it'd be a pain wasn't because it was a pain to go to the castle, but because it was a pain having to deal with the king at this hour.

As the archduke and Tida looked surprised by this, I explained my reasoning to them. They seemed to understand and gave me sheepish grins.

"Y-You can't say that, Tenma! You'll be arrested for treason!" Jeanne took what I'd said seriously and turned pale, but the archduke just laughed.

"You don't need to worry. His Majesty won't be angry with Tenma. After all, Tenma is a long-lost reminder of his best friends, and His Majesty thinks of Tenma as his own nephew."

Jeanne seemed to accept this, but she still looked a bit anxious.

"Well, if he *did* try to arrest Tenma, he'd better be prepared for the whole capital to get destroyed!" the archduke laughed.

I didn't think I'd destroy the capital over something like an arrest...but depending on the time and circumstances, I was certainly capable of it, so maybe he wasn't wrong after all.

Just then, Gramps looked at me. "Tenma, don't you dare. If you feel the urge, at least contain your destruction to the house of Archduke Pissypants," he said in a very serious voice.

I had a feeling this was just going to trigger another argument. When it died down, the carriage had arrived at the castle gates, by which time Gramps had completely given up on skipping out on an audience with the king.

By the way, Uncle Mark had gotten out by the fence at the twenty-kilometer mark. He told me to come visit when I had some free time.

“Archduke, Prince Tida, and Princess Luna have arrived! Open the gates!” Dean called, and the thick gates swung open.

The guards stopped the carriage when they spotted me since they didn’t recognize me, but Dean told them the archduke and the others were inside, and that I was a relative of the sage. Once the guards confirmed the archduke was indeed inside, they bowed and let my carriage through.

We passed through the gates and got out of the carriage about five hundred meters ahead before the front doors of the castle. Under normal circumstances, we’d go park the carriage with the others, but I couldn’t let someone else get their hands on Valley Wind. After we got out, I put him and the carriage back in my magic bag. I thought it probably wasn’t a great idea to let Rocket and the others walk around the castle without the king’s permission, and had them wait in the dimension bag.

We were ready to go inside the castle, but Aura still wasn’t awake. I thought her body might be rebelling against the idea of seeing her sister, such that her instincts were keeping her asleep. Since I had no other choice, I slung Aura over my shoulder as we walked through the castle doors, where dozens of maids and butlers were waiting for us with their heads bowed. Cruyff was standing at the head of the butlers.

“Where is His Majesty right now, Cruyff?” the archduke asked, before dismissing the remaining butlers and maids.

“His Majesty was in his bedchamber, but we received word of your arrival, so he’s presently in the throne room,” Cruyff said. Then he made eye contact with me.

“It’s nice to see you again, Cruyff.”

“Master Tenma! It certainly has been a while! I’m relieved to see you’re, well... Forgive how abrupt this is, but it seems His Majesty has something up his sleeve, so do be careful...”

I was just extending a casual greeting, but Cruyff had taken it upon himself to deliver the bad news. It seemed that the king hadn’t changed.

While Cruyff showed us to the throne room, I noticed a maid waiting nearby.



Actually, she looked more like a model wearing a maid's uniform. She had perfectly styled glossy blonde hair which fell to her shoulders. She was slightly taller than me—probably around 170 centimeters tall—and although she had quite a strict face, it gave her the impression of being a cool beauty.

That maid quietly approached, stopping before me. "Excuse me." She gave a perfect bow and then flicked Aura, who was still unconscious and slung over my shoulder, squarely in the forehead.

Surprisingly, the attack made a very loud noise, almost as if it had echoed through Aura's skull. "Owww! Wh-What's going on?! Is it an enemy?! Is this an ambush?!"

Aura swung her head wildly around to look as she clung to my back. Two very soft sensations danced against me as she flung herself about. I was momentarily distracted by this, but then I made eye contact with the maid in front of me. She gave me a meaningful smile, as if she knew just what I was experiencing.

"What is it? What is it? Argh!!! Huh? Where am I?" Aura gradually calmed down, her movements slowing. Once they did, the maid looked over at her.

"Long time no see, Aura."

Suddenly, Aura froze, her neck craning slowly towards the maid like a rusty old toy's. And once she saw the maid's face... "A-Aina!" she cried in a terrified voice.

"So this is your sister, Aura?"

Come to think of it, they did look pretty similar, but their vibes were totally different. Actually, Aina reminded me of Aura back when I'd first met her, when she was still hiding her true personality. Which meant that she was probably just like her sister...

Aina turned towards me. "It's nice to meet you, Master Tenma. I'm terribly sorry that my foolish sister has caused you so much trouble. I'm her older sister, Aina. By the way, you weren't thinking of something strange just now, were you?" Her gaze was so sharp and perceptive that I thought my heart stopped for a moment.

"No, I was just thinking you're as beautiful as everyone said you were." I blurted out.

Aina's face didn't move a muscle. "I'm honored to receive such a compliment." She gave me an elegant bow, and I glanced at Aura and sighed. Once Aura looked back at me, she started flailing again.

"H-Hey, Master Tenma! What's with that sigh?!" Aura jumped off my back and stood in front of me, pointing at Aina. "She's deceiving you! She may look sweet on the outside, but she's very barbaric on the inside! Not only that, but she's a spinster!"

Aura was very excited now as she pointed at Aina and began

talking trash about her. Meanwhile, Aina didn't seem to notice. She had a smile plastered to her face and stood quietly behind Aura.

"The reason she can't get married is because of how violent she is!" Aura kept on verbally assaulting her sister, when suddenly Aina landed another very effective (and loud) flick to her skull.

"Aura, is that how you always speak to your master? You need to know your place!" Aina stood behind Aura and put her into some kind of wrestling choke hold.

"C-Cobra Twist!" Aina continued choking Aura, ignoring our shock. Meanwhile, Aura was in so much pain she couldn't speak. Her face turned bright red and her mouth flapped vainly.

"Aina! What are you doing?!" Everyone else was stunned, except for Cruyff, who intervened in the scuffle between the sisters. Obviously, a butler such as himself couldn't allow such a shameful spectacle to continue. However, his reaction was the complete opposite of what I expected. "If your form is too perfect when you perform that move, she'll wriggle out of it eventually! You need to pull your weight farther back!"

With this valuable advice, Aina shifted her weight backwards. Aura's breath grew quieter at the same time. I thought at this rate, Aura might seriously die, so I tried to stop her, but Aina let go of her before I could reach them.

"I'm terribly sorry for the commotion, everyone. I was just so excited to see my dear younger sister after so long." Aina bowed her head to everyone and lightly put a hand on Aura's shoulder, who was just barely able to stand on her own two feet. "Aura, enough horseplay. You need to know your place. Otherwise, next time it will hurt much worse."

Aura began trembling. Looking satisfied, Aina turned towards me. "Master Tenma. Please let me know if Aura ever oversteps her bounds and I'll strang— I mean, strictly lecture her." Despite her ominous words, she quickly put a smile on her face.

"Well, that's enough horseplay for now! His Majesty is waiting, after all!" Cruyff seemed eager to show us to the throne room. He stood in front, leading the way, and gave some orders to Aina.

"Hey, Jeanne?"

"Yes, Tenma?"

"Did Aina get angry because of Aura's attitude towards me?"

"No, I think it's because Aura called her a spinster."

"Let's be careful of her."

"Yes..."

While we were having that conversation, we finally arrived at the fourth floor of the castle, which was where the throne room was located.

“I’ve brought everyone. Please open the door,” Cruyff said to the soldiers standing guard. The soldiers checked us over and then opened the door.

“The archduke and his party are here!”

“Let them through.”

The archduke stood at the front of our line as we entered the room, where the king sat on a luxurious throne. He looked slightly older than the last time I’d seen him, but otherwise more or less the same.

A beautiful woman sat on a throne next to the king. I guessed she was the queen. I’d heard that the king and queen were around the same age as Mom and Dad, but the queen looked much younger than that.

Three men stood three steps down from the thrones. The first was wearing a more elaborate getup, unlike the other two. He had a friendly smile on his face. The second was slender and wore glasses, and seemed to be appraising us—or rather, me.

The third was taller than the other two, and I could even tell through his clothes that he was very muscular. He was looking at me with a grin, and I could already tell he was plotting something.

“Thank you, guards. You may leave.” All the soldiers inside the throne room left. “Now...” The king suddenly stood up and walked down the stairs towards us. “Long time no see, Tenma. I hope you’ve been well?” He spoke in a threatening voice, which wasn’t how I remembered him. I had a feeling something was up, so I felt I needed to be very careful in how I addressed him.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Your Majesty. I’m so sorry I worr
—”

An arrow flew straight towards me as I spoke, interrupting me. I caught it in my hand, then ran in the direction it had come from. I circled around the pillar there and found a man hiding behind it.

“What’s the meaning of this?” I threw the arrow down irritably and glared at the king.

The queen and the first two men were astonished by this turn of events. On the other hand, the king and the third man were smiling.

“Sorry, sorry! Just a little prank. Forgive me!” The king apologized with a laugh. The third man put his hands up before his face ruefully. I felt that this went rather beyond a mere prank and was about to say as much, but then the queen rose from her seat and walked over to the king, brandishing her staff.

“Oof!” A loud thwack rang throughout the room as she smacked the king squarely on his royal behind. The king grabbed his rear and crumpled to the floor.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?! Lyle, you get over here

too!”

Lyle must have been the third man’s name. Beginning to sweat, the man hesitantly approached the queen.

“You’re an adult, and even if you *are* the secretary of military affairs, how dare you play with arrows by shooting them at a child!”

“No, Mother, we weren’t playing...”

“Don’t you dare talk back to me!”

“Yes, mother!”

Apparently, Lyle was the secretary...the Minister of Military Affairs. It was hard to believe the man who stood at the head of the military was now cowering before his mother while she lectured him. There was no way he could let his subordinates see him like this.

“I’m so sorry. We invited you here and these idiots have treated you so poorly. Shall we talk elsewhere?” the queen said, grabbing my arm and beginning to pull me from the room. Everyone else was stupefied, but the queen didn’t seem to mind. “What are you all doing? Don’t just stand there. Come along,” she said, inviting Jeanne and the others, who hesitantly followed.

Gramps, the archduke, Tida, Luna, Cruyff, the first man, and the second man also came along.

The military secretary was about to follow behind the second man, but then the queen turned around. “Lyle, if you want to participate, then go get tea and snacks. And don’t you dare cut corners.”

The military secretary bowed and ran off in the opposite direction.

“Now, shall we go?” The queen had a pleasant smile on her face as she tugged at me. I asked if it was okay to just leave the king behind, and she gave me a serious look. “Yes, it’s fine. How dare he play some terrible prank on a guest *he* invited to the castle—a child, no less! He’s out of control. You’d do best to simply ignore him, Tenma.”

I had to admit the king had gone a bit too far—but the point of the arrow had been cut off, plus it had been wrapped in cloth so it wouldn’t have injured me. I wondered if he was truly just trying to test my strength. Well, even if he was, it still wasn’t something he should have done.

At any rate, I decided to follow the queen’s advice and forget about the king for the moment. Speaking of the king, he was still down for the count after just one blow from the queen.

Briefly, I made eye contact with the king. He stretched his arm out to me as he crawled across the ground, but the queen stood such that her body blocked him from view as she ushered me out of the room.

“It’s this way. Come in.” The queen escorted us to a room on the floor below where the throne room was located. “This room is for

guests, so you can make yourself at home,” she said, gesturing towards some seats. She didn’t seem to mind that Jeanne and Aura were slaves either, because when they hesitated, she took them by the arm and forced them to sit down next to me.

“Don’t you mind that Jeanne and Aura are slaves, Your Majesty?” I asked as the queen smiled pleasantly at the girls.

She answered without hesitation. “Of course not. They’re your family, and invited guests. Why would it bother me?” She smiled again. Apparently she’d been aware that they were slaves before inviting us here, and that was why it didn’t bother her, but I had to wonder what would happen if the reformists caught wind of this.

As if reading my mind, the first man responded in place of the queen. “You don’t need to worry about that. If the reformists say anything, it’ll be easy for us to take them down a peg.”

I didn’t understand what he meant. He thought for a moment and then continued. “Do you really think we’d want to make nice with anyone who treated those girls badly?”

“Ah, I see what you mean.” I nodded, and the man smiled. But as Jeanne and Aura still didn’t understand, the man dove into a deeper explanation.

“Listen. Right now, you’re merely slaves, but your reputations are about to be overturned...dramatically so.”

“Did you and grandmother invite Jeanne and Aura to gain Tenma’s favor, Father?” Tida asked bluntly, at which the man gave a wry chuckle.

“That wasn’t our intent, but I can see how someone might interpret it that way. But that’s fine. This will be beneficial for both parties,” Tida’s father—the prince—said.

However, the queen looked surprised. “Oh? Well, I don’t agree with that. Tenma is the child of two of my best friends, and I’ve seen the way that he treats the girls. He doesn’t treat them like slaves—he treats them like family. So I invited them here as members of his family.” She sounded a bit angry.

The prince chuckled sheepishly, but didn’t say anything—it seemed he still thought he was right. This made the atmosphere in the room somewhat awkward, but just then the door suddenly burst open.

Everyone turned towards it in surprise. The military secretary walked in. “I’m so sorry I’m late! I brought tea and snacks!” He was carrying a delicate basket that looked quite out of place in his hands. Aina walked behind him, pushing a cart filled with sandwiches and tea.

“I remembered that these snacks were delivered to my room yesterday... Here they are!” He offered mini cream puffs from the basket. “I heard these are really popular recently in Gunjo City. I

asked Duke Sanga to send some to me,” he said proudly. Only Tida and Luna looked happy. Everyone else rolled their eyes, and the queen just sighed.

“Lyle... You fail!”

“But why?!” the military secretary screamed. The queen sighed once again and pointed to the mini cream puffs.

“What are those called?”

“Huh? Um, cream puffs...?”

“No, no. I’m talking about the name of the brand!”

“Ohhh. I’m pretty sure they were called Tenma... *Oh!*”

“Why would you bring the *inventor* of mini cream puffs his own creation?! You need to use your brain more!”

The military secretary turned bright red. The archduke stifled laughter, and the first and second men looked exasperated. Meanwhile, it was all so far removed from how I imagined a military secretary to act that I burst out laughing.

“S-Sorry. Actually, I haven’t had any desserts from the Full Belly Inn since I left Gunjo City. I’m excited to try them.” I reached into the basket and bit into a mini cream puff. “Mm, they’re good! Dozle’s such a great cook. Thanks for the kind gesture, Minister.”

After seeing my reaction, the queen took one of the mini cream puffs and placed them on her plate. “Well, if Tenma doesn’t have a problem with it, then I suppose it’s fine. Lyle, just because you are the minister of military affairs doesn’t mean that you can forget about your dignity as a noble.”

“Yes, mother... I’m very ashamed...”

After the queen took a cream puff, Aina passed out plates with more cream puffs on them, then brewed some tea. Aura just watched her. When Aina realized Aura was watching her, she glared back for a moment, then didn’t pour any tea for her.

After Aina finished pouring the tea, she called Aura over. Aura looked scared as she approached her sister, who told her to brew tea for them both. Aura confidently began pouring the tea, but...

“It’s disgusting!”

“You didn’t brew it long enough!”

“You brewed it too long!”

“You didn’t warm up the cup!”

She had one critique after the other for Aura, and made her keep redoing it.

Just as I was thinking that maybe Aina was being too strict, she turned towards me. “Master Tenma, please leave my sister in my care when she’s on a break and has some time. I can’t say that I’m an expert by any means, but I think I can make her a better maid than she is now,” she suddenly suggested.

At these words, Aura gestured to me wildly behind Aina's back. As soon as I saw her pleas, I said without hesitation, "I'd really appreciate that," and bowed. Aina looked surprised for a moment, but quickly pulled herself together and gave me a satisfied nod. Meanwhile, Aura crumbled to the floor with a devastated expression on her face, as though she had just witnessed the end of the world.

Her reaction made me think of the old song "Donna, Donna," which was about feeling like a calf being led to slaughter.

"That's a great idea! Oh, I know—how about you teach Jeanne a thing or two as well, Aina?" the queen suggested.

"What?!" This time it was Jeanne who froze.

"Jeanne's a young girl, after all. It would be a valuable experience for her! Just think of it as training for marriage!" the queen urged forcefully. Jeanne was unable to protest and just nodded. "I'm going to tell my husband to make arrangements so that you and your party can travel to and from the castle freely, Tenma. At any rate, Aina, you may start your lessons at lunchtime, the day after tomorrow."

"Yes, Queen Maria."

As plans kept being made, Jeanne, who definitely had no room to object, just sat there nodding and listening.

"Now, now, mother. We haven't even introduced ourselves! We can't just make plans without even doing that!" the first man said to his mother.

"Goodness, you're right! I was just so excited, it completely slipped my mind! I'm terribly sorry, Tenma. I'm Maria von Blumere Krastin. I was best friends with your mother, Celia. I'm so pleased to meet you."

After the queen introduced herself, the first man followed suit. I was about to stand up myself, but he stood up first and stopped me with his hand. "No need to stand. I'm Crown Prince Caesar von Blumere Krastin. It seems my son and daughter caused you quite a bit of trouble, and I apologize for that." The crown prince bowed his head. Under normal circumstances, this would have been unthinkable, but none of the royals in the room seemed surprised.

"I guess I'm next. I am the second son of the king and queen, and the Minister of Finance, Zane von Blumere Krastin." The next prince introduced himself simply. I had a feeling he was still cautious of me.

"My apologies for earlier. I was just curious about how the legendary Tenma would react! I'm Lyle von Blumere Krastin!" Just as his appearance suggested, Lyle was a jovial man. He definitely seemed like a soldier. He was also the one who resembled the king most out of all of them.

"I'm sorry for not introducing myself earlier. I'm—"

"Wait one minute!" the queen suddenly interrupted me. "Although

this is our first time meeting, you're my best friend's child. I don't need some formal introduction. As long as we're not in front of others, you may speak to me just as you speak to anyone else."

"Oh, but..."

"I insist."

"Very well..."

The queen looked satisfied with my answer, then gestured for me to continue. I looked at the crown prince, who smiled. "If mother says it's all right, then I don't mind. Plus, I heard you called His Majesty 'Uncle Alex,' so I think it would be a bit too late to start speaking formally now. Oh, and by the way—you don't need to call me 'Crown Prince' either." The crown prince—er, Caesar—dredged up the past with a laugh.

"In that case, you can just call me Lyle. I'm not used to being called 'Minister' by children!" Prince Lyle followed Prince Caesar.

"Goodness! Well then, in that case, you should just call me Maria! Understood, Tenma?"

It seemed that the royals in this kingdom were all pretty casual, but whether it was just when they were with their relatives or not, I wasn't sure.

Meanwhile, the minister of finance didn't say a word. Under normal circumstances, I'd have said that was the proper attitude for a member of the royal family to adopt, but in this case it was beginning to seem strange.

"I'm Tenma, an adventurer. It's nice to meet all of you." I introduced Jeanne and Aura as well, but they hadn't taken the hint, and began speaking to the royals very formally. Not that I could blame them, of course. In any other circumstance, speaking casually to a member of the royal family might have ended up with you getting your head cut off.

The whole time this was going on, Aina was staring at Aura with a critical look in her eye. I wasn't sure exactly what Aura had done wrong, but I had a feeling Aina would tell her later.

"Well, now that we're all on a first-name basis, you may call me by my first name as well. Give it a try," the archduke said, but I couldn't get myself to do it.

Gramps was watching our exchange. "Have you even *told* Tenma your name?" he asked.

"Oh... Come to think of it, I haven't!"

At this point, yet another of their arguments ensued. They really could fight about anything, anywhere. If they hated each other so much, why did they insist on sitting next to each other?

As the commotion continued—although they were the only ones causing a commotion, and they were the two oldest people in the

room, to boot—the door slowly opened.

“That was so cruel, leaving me there alone...” The king hobbled inside with a cane, but before he could finish his sentence, Maria rushed over to the door.

“No one invited you,” she interrupted the king, who seemed so weak he couldn’t even resist when she pushed him out the door, closed it, and locked it. I heard him pounding on the door from the outside saying “Let me iiiin!” but Maria completely ignored him and sat back down as if nothing had happened before asking Aina for another cup of tea.

I was worried about the king, but Queen Maria stopped all of my efforts to go check on him, so he was never able to come inside.

“It’s late, so why don’t you spend the night here? Aina, prepare three rooms.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Aina promptly left the room to carry out the queen’s request. When she opened the door I caught a glimpse of the king, but one glare from the queen kept him outside.

“Tenma, do you have plans for tomorrow?” Prince Lyle asked. I told him that I didn’t particularly, and for some reason he smirked at me. “All right! In that case, come to the training room tomorrow! The king’s guard and the first unit of knights will be sparring, and I’d like you to participate!”

“Hey, Lyle. It’s too soon for him!” Prince Caesar admonished Prince Lyle, but Prince Lyle didn’t seem to care, and kept going.

“It’s a good opportunity for us to see what Tenma’s made of. Plus, if he shows the knights what he’s capable of, it’ll lower the chance of any misunderstandings.”

“I think that alone will actually cause misunderstandings...” I tried to argue, but Lyle seemed to have the same personality as the king, which is to say that any objections were completely ineffective against him.

“Don’t worry! The king’s guard and the first unit of the knights are the very strongest warriors in the kingdom! They’re much more likely to respect the strong than other knights.” Prince Lyle let out a jovial laugh, but since he resembled the king so much, all that lingered in my head was the word “anxiety.”

“Tenma, give it up. When Lyle gets like this, he won’t change his mind,” Prince Caesar said apologetically. Queen Maria and the minister of finance both nodded, seemingly agreeing.

“Queen Maria, I have prepared the rooms.” Just then, Aina returned.

“Wonderful job. I’m sure Tenma and his party are exhausted, so let’s call it a night. Aina, please show Tenma and the others to their

rooms.” And with that, the meeting was called to a close. I followed Aina out the door. However, the king was lurking in the shadows and immediately grabbed me by the shoulder.

“Tenmaaa, can’t you just convince Maria to talk to me?” Hobbling on his cane and still smarting from Queen Maria’s attack, he was practically in tears.

I gave him an awkward smile, and just then, heard Queen Maria’s voice coming from inside the room. “I need to talk to you. Come inside.” The color drained from the king’s face when he heard this, but since his rear end still seemed to be hurting, he was unable to flee. His head fell dejectedly as he entered the room.

Prince Caesar and the others immediately evacuated the room and closed the door behind them. I heard angry shouts coming from inside the room, but since the heavy door was shut, I couldn’t make out any details. Yet, for some reason, I could clearly hear the king howling apologies to his wife.

“Eh, this always happens. There’s no sense in worrying about it, so let’s call it a night. Tida and Luna, you need to come to my room for a scolding.”

Now Tida and Luna looked like they were on the verge of tears, but they didn’t try to flee either. They silently followed Prince Caesar to his room.

“This way, please, Master Tenma. You and Master Merlin will be staying in these rooms, while Jeanne and Aura stay in that one.”

Aina showed us to rooms on the same floor. Gramps’s room was across from mine, while Jeanne and Aura’s room was next to mine.

“I’m sure you’re very tired. I will come to wake you up early tomorrow morning, so please get some rest. If you need anything at all, you have a servant on call. Please don’t hesitate to ask for them.” Aina bowed, then turned to leave.

“I’m positively pooped! Let’s talk some more tomorrow, Tenma. Good night.”

“Good night, Tenma. See you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Master Tenma.”

Everyone went into their respective rooms. Aura didn’t seem pleased with me, but she still spoke to me politely. That must have been how afraid she was of Aina’s punishment.

I was certain she would become a wonderful maid one day...but I didn’t think I wanted her to be like Aina. That would be kinda scary. I didn’t want to think too many rude thoughts about Aina for fear that she would suddenly materialize before me again, and decided to go into my room and sleep.

The moment I got into bed, I realized I hadn’t fed Shiromaru and the others. I quickly got some food out of my bag and gave it to them.

They gobbled it up, so they must have been starving. I wasn't sure if it was okay for me to let my followers roam free in my room yet, so for tonight I decided to have them stay in my bag. Afterwards, I crawled into bed for real. I just hoped that tomorrow wouldn't be too much of a pain...

Part Five

In a particular room, in a corner of the castle...

The interior made it seem like it was a woman's room, with elegant furnishings and decorations. There was a bed in the center with a chair next to it, in which a woman was sitting.

This woman was Maria von Blumere Krastin. She was the king's wife, which naturally made her the queen.

She sat in her chair, sipping wine as she listened to her maid's report. "I see. So Tenma has other women he's close to as well."

"Yes, that's right. We've confirmed there are nine of them. I believe we can exclude three of them from the running, however."

"On what basis?"

"Well, one is still a child and seems to be Master Tenma's apprentice. The other two are members of an adventuring party he's familiar with, and it seems he sees them less as women, and more as comrades."

The maid who was reporting to the queen on Tenma's female connections was Aina. It was unclear how she'd obtained all of this information, but nonetheless she seemed to have a very detailed report prepared.

"And what about the other six?"

"I shall start with his oldest acquaintances first. There are three sisters who are adventurers in Gunjo City, the vice-guildmaster of Gunjo City, a woman he saved from bandits, and the third daughter of Duke Sanga. The sisters I mentioned are catgirl triplets, and they've known Master Tenma since he first arrived at Gunjo City. Among all the candidates, they have spent the most time with him. The next is the vice-guildmaster. Their connection began with her keeping a close eye on him, since the amount of monsters he'd slain seemed unusual for an amateur. However, once she'd cleared up that misunderstanding, she began to seek him out for various quests."

"And what do you mean by 'misunderstanding'?"

"Having reached the point where she's realized Master Tenma's true abilities. I would say that the vice-guildmaster knows them better than anyone else, but it would take a long time to explain her goals in that matter."

"In other words, it's irrelevant to the matter at hand. Who's next?"

"The woman whom Tenma saved from the bandit Banza, who set up camp in a village outside of Gunjo City."

"He saved her from bandits?"

"Yes, that's right. Banza and his gang took over an entire village

and killed most of the residents, then pretended to be villagers. They attacked travelers and adventurers who came to the village, and set up a fake quest at the guild to lure in more of them. Master Tenma took that quest. Meanwhile, Banza kidnapped many of the women, using them as slaves. Master Tenma and his party defeated Banza and his entire gang, then saved the women.”

“Tenma was the first person who took the quest? Talk about divine retribution... So why is that woman listed among the candidates?”

“According to my research, Master Tenma went to say goodbye to her before he set off, and she pleaded with him to take her with him. Master Tenma said no and the girl wouldn’t accept it. At that point, I decided she was a candidate.”

“I see... And the final one is Duke Sanga’s third daughter, Primera?”

“Yes. They met when he was quarreling with one of her subordinates. Master Tenma seems to be close with Duke Sanga, and appears to get along well with his daughter as well. Not only that, but it looks as if she deeply respects Master Tenma.”

“I see. And what is your conclusion?”

“After considering a number of factors, I estimate that the candidates that would be most beneficial for the royalists are, in this order: Lady Primera, the king’s guard Kriss, and Princess Luna.”

“Putting Primera aside, why are Kriss and Luna in the running?”

“Since Kriss is part of the king’s guard, we can be sure that she is loyal to the royal family, and she seems to be aware of Master Tenma’s situation. Also, she would be easy to control. And obviously, I added Princess Luna purely for her connection to the royal family.”

“You’re very blunt. Kriss is your best friend, isn’t she?”

“I added her *because* she’s my best friend.”

Maria downed the remaining wine in her glass and poured another. “But what about Jeanne?”

“She won’t be a problem.”

There was a glint in Maria’s eye. “Continue.”

“Personally, I want to root for her. But as of right now, she’s too dependent on Master Tenma. She could get easily carried away, which would prove to be detrimental to our cause.”

“You share my opinion, then. I don’t dislike her, of course, but I don’t think she’s suitable for the role.”

“She wasn’t always like that...” Aina’s face clouded for a moment, a gesture which wasn’t overlooked by Maria.

“What was she like before?”

“Well, I haven’t known her as long as Aura has, of course. But my impression is that she was more of a tomboy than a well-mannered

young lady. When she was little, she and Aura would run all around the garden and get into mischief. Jeanne's parents would scold them, but to little effect. I remember scolding them as well. That was when she was very, very young, though," Aina said, with a nostalgic look on her face.

"If I recall, Jeanne is the daughter of Viscount Armelia, whose house fell into ruin. Do you know the reason for that?"

"Yes. According to my research, there was a quarrel amongst nobles. Afterwards, there was a rebellion in his domain. His house's status began to decline because of that, but the decisive factor was that a relative of his, Baronet Podro il Chloride, abandoned the viscount. Publicly, he said he was simply going independent, but actually it was more of a defection. At the time, there were rumors going around that the baronet was actually responsible for instigating the rebellion in Armelia's domain, but there was insufficient evidence to support the claim, and the rumors dissipated."

"You certainly know a lot about this. Anyway, I understand that Jeanne has various circumstances...but that's a separate matter. Unless we see some kind of change in her, I'll have to use whatever means necessary to separate her from Tenma."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I shall do my best as well."

The queen poured another glass of wine and handed it to Aina. "By the way, why didn't you include Aura in the list of candidates?"

"Queen Maria... That's just being plain rude to Master Tenma. Jeanne's evaluation would have been a bit higher if not for her, after all."

"You're really amazing."

"Thank you... Though, was it really necessary to go to such lengths in regard to Master Tenma, Your Majesty?" Aina asked, taking a sip of wine.

"Goodness—he's Celia and Ricardo's precious child! It's only natural for me to act in his best interests in their place. Plus, the king got to do it with the boys, so what's wrong with me getting a little involved in this?" Maria asked with amusement.

Aina let out a sigh. "I think this is more than a 'little' involved... I'm sure Master Tenma has no idea that the queen is weeding out potential marriage candidates for him behind the scenes." There was a certain amount of pity in Aina's voice as she said this.



"Good morning, Master Tenma. Breakfast is almost ready. Are you awake, Master Tenma?"

I knew by the rapping on the door and Aina's voice that it was morning, but I couldn't physically react to the sound. I felt myself

once again traveling towards the land of dreams.

“Master Tenma, I’m coming in!”

I heard Aina’s voice, but I was only half conscious. However...

“S-Sis! That’s my job! I’ll wake him up!”

Just as I felt myself slipping into my dreams again, I was jolted awake by Aura’s shouts.

“It doesn’t matter if you wake him up now! It doesn’t change the fact that you forgot about your duties and overslept! Do you really intend on appearing before Master Tenma with that bedhead? Go brush your hair this instant!”

“O-Okaaay...”

I heard Aura’s footsteps retreat. It didn’t seem like I’d be able to fall asleep again after that, so I reluctantly got out of bed and stretched.

“Are you awake now, Master Tenma?”

“Yes, I’m up. Just wait, I’ll get ready.”

I took some fresh clothes out of my magic bag, wiped my body clean with a towel, and quickly changed. Then I opened the door and greeted her.

“Morning, Aina. I’d like to wash my face. Where can I do that?”

“Good morning, Master Tenma. There’s a bathroom just this way. Please follow me.”

I went to the bathroom and found Gramps there grooming his beard.

“Oh, Tenma! Morning.”

“Morning, Gramps.”

After I returned the greeting, for some reason, Gramps started trembling. “Gramps?”

“Oh, sorry. It just feels like a dream... I never thought I’d be able to ever talk to you again, Tenma...” Tears formed in Gramps’s eyes, but he splashed water on his face to try to cover it up.

I stood next to him as he splashed his face, washed my own face, and then brushed my teeth.

“By the way, where are Shiromaru and the others?”

“They’re sleeping in my bag. Even though they’re my followers, I wasn’t sure if it was all right for them to walk freely around the castle. Since they are monsters, I was afraid it would cause a commotion. I decided to keep them inside my bag until I received permission from the king.”

Shiromaru poked his head out of the bag as if to say, *You called?* I petted him on the head and urged him back inside.

“Master Tenma, you have guests. They’re at the gate waiting to be let in. What shall I do?”

“Guests? Who is it?” I wondered who could be coming to visit me

first thing in the morning, but it turned out to be Uncle Mark and Aunt Martha. "I'll go see them. When you say they're by the gate, do you mean the one we passed through with the carriage yesterday?"

"Yes, that's right." If I remembered correctly, the gate was about five hundred meters away from the front door of the castle.

"I'll use magic to fly there, then."

"I'll come with you," Gramps offered.

We used Flying magic at the front door and reached the gate in under a minute. Several people were startled to see us flying, but once they realized one of us was Gramps, they didn't call the guards. The moment I landed, Aunt Martha hugged me.

"You're alive, you're really alive! I'm so happy!" She clung to me as she sobbed, but after a while she stopped crying and let go. "Oh, it's like a dream! I heard you were safe, but I had to see you with my own eyes..."

"Ho ho ho! I thought the same thing myself! Until I saw Tenma this morning, I thought maybe yesterday had just been a dream!" Gramps said.

Aunt Martha nodded.

"What are you two doing here so early in the morning?" I asked.

Uncle Mark, who had been quiet until then, spoke up. "Last night we went around to all the residents of Kukuri Village who live in the capital now and told them that you were alive. Several people want to throw you a party tonight, so we came as representatives to invite you and Merlin."

Gramps and I exchanged looks. "Well, we don't have any plans... Shall we have the party in my back garden?"

"That would be great! We hadn't figured out where to have it yet."

"You just thought of that now, didn't you?" I asked Gramps, who gave me a sheepish chuckle. But get-togethers like this had been a regular occurrence back in Kukuri Village, and it filled me with nostalgia.

"We'll do all the preparations—all you have to do is show up this evening!" And so Uncle Mark and Aunt Martha rushed off to get things started.

"Ho, ho! A party sure does bring back memories. I should get some liquor..."

"We need to eat breakfast first, or we'll face the wrath of Aina."

"Well, we can't have that! Let's return to the castle! Aina frightens me..."

And so the two of us returned to the castle...which turned out to be the wrong decision, because Aina was waiting for us nearby with a grumpy look on her face.

“Um, whatever is the matter, Aina?”

“Why are you speaking so formally with me? I’m sorry, it’s nothing—I just felt annoyed for some reason...”

It seemed like Aina’s instincts were unbelievably canny.

“I’m sure it’s because Aura’s made another mistake... Anyway, we’re hungry. Would you mind showing us to breakfast?”

“I’m sure you’re right. And of course. Please follow me. I’ll have to interrogate her later...” she said under her breath. I felt bad towards Aura, but it served her right for her previous transgressions.

Aina brought us to the same room in which we’d spoken to the queen the night before. Breakfast was already prepared, and all we had to do was take a seat.

“I’m sorry for the delay... By the way, what’s the king and queen doing here?”

Not only was the king there, but Queen Maria, Prince Caesar, Prince Lyle, the minister of finance, the archduke, Tida, and Luna were all there as well.

“Well, there were some things we weren’t able to discuss yesterday, so we decided to have breakfast together!” the king said with a smile.

Well, wasn’t that his own fault?

Just then, I felt Queen Maria’s mood change in an instant. “Darling. Where’s your apology to Tenma? Was your behavior appropriate for the ruler of a kingdom?”

The king started to sweat and sat up straighter. “Tenma, I’m very sorry for last night! Please forgive me. I’m begging you!” He placed his hands on the table and bowed his head. No matter how I looked at it, it was like he was groveling before me.

“You always assume that same pose when you apologize... Well, Tenma? Will you forgive this man?” the queen asked.

I looked at the king, who didn’t move a muscle. “Yes, I forgive him. I was a bit irritated at the time, but it doesn’t bother me anymore. Plus, this is the king we’re talking about, so I had a feeling he had a reason for doing it.”

Truthfully, I was trying not to let it bother me, but I thought I probably didn’t have to say that out loud. Like I said, the arrow had its point removed, and the king had a grin on his face when he approached me, so I figured he had something up his sleeve.

“I see—you’ll forgive me? Thank you! Well, let’s eat breakfast before it gets cold!”

The sudden change in the king’s mood was a bit exasperating, but in the end, eating breakfast was more important.

While we were eating, Prince Lyle called out to me. “Tenma, come to training once you’re done! They’ll be gathering in the room soon

enough. So hurry it up!" He acted like we'd already agreed upon it.

"First thing in the morning?" I asked with surprise.

Prince Lyle shoved a piece of bread in his mouth and grinned. "You think the enemy waits until night to attack? Battles can happen any time of day! That's how I train our knights to think!"

"I'm not a knight..." I muttered.

Ignoring me, Lyle washed down his bread with some milk, then stood up. "C'mon, let's go!" He dragged me along with him, which Queen Maria looked quite irritated about.

"Will you calm down? Tenma is a guest!"

"Mother, I've already told the soldiers he's coming—I can't back down now!" he explained, but the queen wouldn't relent.

"I had plans to take Tenma shopping! Just how do you plan to make this up to me?!" It seemed the queen had also made plans with me without asking first.

Everyone else seemed shocked by the queen's statement, except for Lyle.

"Don't worry about that, mother. Training will end before noon, so you can go shopping with him later."

"Well, in that case, I suppose it's fine. Although it will shorten our trip..."

The queen gave in...again without asking my permission, of course. Before I could say anything, Aina spoke up. "If Master Tenma is leaving, I was thinking of training Jeanne and Aura during that time."

Jeanne and Aura both widened their eyes. They must have thought today would be their last day off, because they looked thoroughly shocked.

"What? Um, Sis! It's too sudden! We're not prepared! Let's just take today easy!" Aura protested, but Aina just glared at her.

"Don't worry. When Queen Maria goes shopping, we'll have plenty of free time. And I'll use that time to teach you!"

It seemed like Aina wasn't going to take no for an answer. Jeanne's and Aura's moods immediately changed. They wouldn't be escaping their training. Likewise, there wasn't a way to get out of Lyle's training or Queen Maria's shopping. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them discussing their schedules.

"Um, I have plans this evening, and there are a lot of other things I'd like to get done..." I told them with a smile.

"Don't worry! We'll be done by then!" they both answered in unison.

They relayed the schedule to me. First, I would go immediately to the training room, where I would spar with the knights and the king's guard, which would end before lunch. After lunch, I would

accompany the queen on a shopping trip, and we'd return to the castle before evening. This was all decided...without any input from me.

I wasn't allowed any objections. And even if I had been, they wouldn't have listened anyway.

The whole thing was so forceful that I glanced over at the king, but he didn't seem bothered. In fact... "I think I'll come watch you spar, Tenma!" he said, in high spirits.

I glanced over at Prince Caesar and the minister of finance, and they said...

"Just give it up..."

"I'm sorry, but there's no stopping them..."

"Well, let's hurry! We can't keep the men waiting any longer!"

Prince Lyle grabbed me and dragged me along. Apparently, he wasn't going to take no for an answer, no matter what. He led me to a room on the opposite side of the castle that was outfitted for sparring or training.

"Hey, you're all here! I brought Tenma, everybody!" Prince Lyle shouted, before calling Dean over. He pushed me out in front of everyone. I could hear the first knights' unit and the king's guard whispering about me.

"Tenma... He really brought you here," Dean said, glancing from Prince Lyle's cheerful face to my own not-so-cheerful one. He seemed to understand what had happened.

"Yep..."

"Dean! We'll begin training as usual. I want the last match to be between teams of members selected from the king's guard and the first knights' unit! Punish anyone who fights poorly! That's all from me!" I could see tension running through all the soldiers' faces as they heard the prince's words.

"You heard His Highness! Everyone find partners and start sparring!" Dean said, leading the knights to spring into action.

It seemed they were free to choose their own partners, and everyone had their own strategy. Some chose the person closest to them at random, some knights wanted to spar with others from different units. Some hoped their opponents would be stronger than them, while some forcefully grabbed those who were weaker than them.

However, no one approached me, though I wasn't sure whether this was because Dean was standing right next to me, or because no one wanted to spar with a child.

"No one came over, huh? Well, no matter. You can spar with me, just go easy on me!" Dean said, suddenly whapping me with his sword that was still in its sheath. I ducked down and dodged his attack, circled behind him, then kicked him.

As he had predicted I'd do this, my foot didn't make contact with him, but everyone else seemed surprised that I had evaded his attack. The knights around us froze.

"Didn't hit ya, huh? That would've rendered anyone else unfit for battle..." Dean said. He looked over at the knights, who immediately averted their eyes.

"I'd appreciate it if you lent me a weapon. Although if you want a serious fight, that won't be necessary. Don't come crying to me once you get injured, though," I joked.

He laughed. "Sorry. If you have your own blade you want to use, that's fine, but if not, feel free to use whatever you like from the weapons over there." Dean gestured to some weapons lined up in the corner of the room.

I chose a rod which was about a meter long and some change, which didn't look like it got much use.

"Ready? Let's begin." Dean came at me head-on. Meanwhile, I held the rod like a sword. With both of our weapons held steady and at the ready, we watched each other for the smallest opening.

The surrounding knights kept watch over us from the corners of their eyes as they trained.

"Ah!"

Just then, a knight who was training nearby was struck and dropped his sword. Using that as a signal, Dean and I closed the distance between each other.

Dean took the lead. He thrust first, then swung his sword. I dodged his attack and waited for the follow-up. He swung his sword twice...three times. I charged in, pretending to go for a counterattack. The moment he moved to deal with me was the moment I had been waiting for. His swing was angled downwards, and the moment he raised his sword...

"Pfffft!"

I released a spray of water from my mouth. Of course, not even Dean could have predicted *that*, and he couldn't dodge it either, so his sword missed its mark. In the meantime, I threw my whole body weight against Dean, pushing him to the ground. And then...

"Did I win?"

I thrust the rod at Dean's throat. Suddenly I heard booing from all around me. Apparently, there were quite a few knights who'd been spying on the fight between me and Dean.

Among them, I heard angry shouts.

"You coward!"

"That was ridiculous!"

"Shame on you!"

For the time being, I pulled my weapon away from Dean and

waved my hand towards the voices. Several knights who saw the gesture took it to mean that I was provoking them and tried to approach us, but...

“Good job, Tenma! Well done!” A loud voice suddenly silenced them. And the owner of that voice was...

“Your Majesty!” It was the lord of this castle. The knights were about to get down on their hands and knees, but the king stopped them.

“You don’t have to bow. Listen to me instead.” His voice silenced the knights, and they all focused intently on him so as not to miss a single word.

“Why would you criticize Tenma’s actions here, but not Dean’s? He was the first to launch a surprise attack. In actual combat, there will be enemies who use even more cowardly means than what you just witnessed. And if you take the time to call out your enemy for being a coward, you’ll end up dead quicker than you can speak. You should always go into battle with the assumption that an attack can come at any time, from any place, cowardly or not. Knowing that will change the outcome greatly. If there is anyone who still wishes to object to this match, step forward now!”

The knights seemed stunned by the king’s words, and some of those who had heckled me looked lost in thought.

“Those who are still dissatisfied should grow powerful enough to be able to bounce back, no matter what tactics the enemy throws at you! I expect someone like that to appear.” And with that, the king walked back into the castle.

“His Majesty is right. No matter how you look at it, it’s my fault for letting my guard down.” Dean stood up and put his hand on my shoulder. “This time, let’s have a *normal* match without magic!” And he quickly repositioned his sword.

I got my rod ready and then...

“Hah!”

He charged at me...with *sand*. Apparently he had kicked sand up from the ground with his feet as he moved towards me.

After that, all bets were off. He was spitting at me, throwing weapons that were lying on the ground nearby—he even threw a knight. It was a completely absurd match, to the point where the surrounding knights were completely dumbstruck. Dean circled around one of the dumbfounded knights and used him as a weapon, flinging him right at me.

“Hey, Dean! It’s about time to change things up! If you spend all your time with Tenma, no one else will get in any practice today!” Prince Lyle called a stop to the match after about an hour.

“Yes, Your Highness! Understood. Tenma, it was fun! See you

later.” Dean walked away looking utterly refreshed. “Hey, next up! Someone else fight Tenma!”

None of the knights stepped forward. Prince Lyle added, “Anyone can go!” but still no one came over. “Don’t tell me you’re that afraid of Tenma?!” he went on. “A proud knight of Krastin can face any opponent!”

After that scolding, most of the knights tried to approach me. Two arrived in front of me at the same time.

“Both of us can take you on at the same time, right, Tenma?”

“I’m looking forward to sparring with you, Tenma!”

It was Jean and Edgar. I’d only met Edgar the day before, and it had been a long time since I’d seen Jean.

“I don’t mind, but is that acceptable for knights?” I wasn’t trying to provoke them, but I was worried that the other knights would make fun of them later. Neither of them seemed to be concerned about that, though.

“Nah—there’s no need to worry about what they say when they were too chicken to fight you in the first place!”

“I don’t even think two people are enough...but at least it’s better than one!” And with that, they both drew their swords and assumed fighting stances. Jean held his broad sword low, while Edgar held his sword in his right hand and a shield in his left.

“Let’s go!”

I decided to switch from the rod to wielding two one-handed swords. I predicted Jean’s attacks would be more forceful, and avoided standing in front of him. At the same time, I was careful not to let Edgar get behind me. This was different from sparring with Dean; I decided to focus on countering and defense.

Jean’s style was essentially focusing on broad swings. However, it seemed like he was trying to break my poise by aiming for my arms and legs. This was likely to do a lot of damage, even if he only grazed them. When my sword came to a stop, he’d charge at me to try to throw me off-balance.

Meanwhile, Edgar blocked attacks with his shield and waited for an opportunity to counterattack. They were taking turns trying to attack me from behind, so it was difficult to deal with them at the same time. If I tried to attack one of them, the other would get me. And what’s more, since one of them had a heavy-handed attack and the other had a piercing attack, it would be very dangerous for me if I fell for a fake out.

After a while, dealing with both of them at once became too much of a pain, and I decided to end the bout right then and there.

First, when Jean brandished his sword to attack, I stepped forward. This caught him off guard, leading his swing to be slightly

wider than he'd originally intended. Then, at that moment, I jumped backwards faster than he could swing his sword down.

This meant Edgar had to put on the brakes too, as he was trying to get behind me, so he paused briefly. Riding the momentum, I struck him in the stomach.

"Argh!" Edgar groaned as I kicked him, sending him rolling across the ground.

"Ah, jeez. There goes Edgar. Oh, well... It's my time to shine!" Jean said, swinging his sword again and immediately trying to close the distance between us. Unlike before, his movements were fast and sharp. I could tell there wasn't as much force behind his sword as before, but this made him even harder to deal with.

Jean's attacks just kept coming in a flurry. None of them hit me, but my sword was reaching its limit. I had a feeling he could tell, and that's why he remained on the offense. But I couldn't let him wait for my sword to break.

"Let's go!"

Previously, I'd stopped him and waited for a chance to counter, but this time I decided to try a tactic using my legs.

Instead of blocking Jean's attacks with my sword, I parried and dodged them. That way, Jean would miss more swings and he would eventually tire, making his technique less precise. Once that happened, I focused my attacks on his arms and legs. As expected, he stopped his continuous attacks and instead began focusing on defense. But due to both fatigue and the pain from my attacks, he inadvertently let go of his sword.

"How about this?" I brought one of my swords to rest right between his eyebrows, with the other against his neck.

"You got me! I surrender!" Jean raised his hands, out of breath. Behind him, Edgar finally stood up, coughing.

"I thought there'd be a hole in my stomach... If I hadn't been wearing armor, I would have died..." Edgar staggered over to us.

Jean smiled wryly in response. "I did a much better job than you, then."

"Both of you were brilliant! Who will challenge Tenma now?!" All of a sudden, it became a contest of who would go up against me. I waited while Prince Lyle decided who I would spar with next.

"Prince Lyle, please allow us to take a break. I know we're training for actual battle, but it will be meaningless if weariness leads to injury," I said.

Prince Lyle agreed and let us take a break. However, at least fifty or sixty knights volunteered to spar with me.

As there were about a hundred men training here in total, that meant over half of them wanted to spar with me. It was a complete

shift from before. The knights seemed to have realized that I wasn't just a child, but a suitable training partner.

By the way, there were a hundred members of the king's guard and a hundred in the first knights' unit. That meant about half of each group was participating here today. Kriss and Sigurd weren't included.

After our twenty-minute break, I decided to train with the other knights. Something I learned from training with them was that the king's guard had a wider variety of techniques than the knights, but that didn't necessarily mean they were stronger.

Basically, the king's guard could use many different techniques and were great at coordinating their attacks. However, I couldn't find anyone who was stronger or better than Dean, or even Jean and Edgar, so for the moment it seemed like my strength was on par with Dean's.

The training lasted until noon, then ended as lunchtime approached. There would be another training session afterwards, during which the other knights and members of the king's guard would train. Dean invited me to that session too, but I declined because I had plans (which had been forced on me) with Queen Maria.

I took a bath before lunch and checked on Shiromaru and Solomon, who were still in the dimension bag. They were both pouting. Apparently they were upset that I hadn't paid much attention to them since we'd arrived. I wasn't sure how Rocket felt, as he was quiet and seemed calm.

I decided to make it up to them by giving them some of the beef and cow's horns I'd gotten earlier, and that seemed to cheer them up.

Now, if only the shopping trip would go as smoothly...

It seemed that women took a lot of time shopping in this world too, and since I would be accompanying a queen, I had no idea how long this would take. I just prayed it wouldn't be too much of a pain as I finished my lunch.

Part Six

“Tenma, let’s go.”

After I finished eating lunch and having tea, Queen Maria suddenly showed up. “We can’t spend too much time shopping, so we’ll just stick with places that are nearby for today.” She grabbed my arm and began walking. I could tell where Lyle had gotten this habit—he’d done the exact same thing earlier this morning.

We walked out the front door and saw a carriage waiting there. The driver was Cruyff, and Edgar and Kriss were waiting next to the door, along with two female knights I didn’t recognize. Under normal circumstances, I’d have thought that wouldn’t have been enough guards to protect the queen on an outing, but I was sure she’d be safe in their hands. And worst-case scenario, I had Rocket and the others to help out.

“Are we all here?”

“We’re still waiting on Princess Isabella and the others... Oh, there they are!”

Just then, I heard footsteps from the front door.

“I’m so sorry for the delay, Mother.” A woman appeared who seemed to be around the same age as Kriss. Luna was with her.

“I’m sorry, grandmother. It took a while for Mommy and me to pick out our outfits.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. If I had heard correctly, Luna was referring to this woman as her mother. I couldn’t help it... I reflexively looked over at Kriss, and we made eye contact.

“Tenma? Why are you staring at me?”

I thought I could see a demon behind Kriss’s back...

“No reason...”

Kriss kept staring at me, but I kept up my poker face, and she eventually gave up.

“Master Tenma, I know she may not look it, but Kriss is actually eight years younger than Princess Isabella,” Cruyff informed me.

“Really? I thought they were the same age because... Ah!” I’d accidentally blurted out the truth.

“Tenmaaaaa! I’m *only* twenty-three years old!” Kriss approached me with a smile, but it was rather frightening...

“Kriss. Twenty-three is around that age...” The demon circled back around behind Kriss again.

In this kingdom, women generally married between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, but for nobles, that age range was closer to sixteen to twenty.

Kriss approached me instead of Cruyff and said in a huff, "I'm fine! I've got plenty of time! Right?!" She grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. Cruyff loomed behind her, a grin on his face.

"Isn't there anyone you've got your eye on in the king's guard? Like Edgar or Sigurd or someone?"

I name-dropped them to try to escape from Kriss's grasp. She made a look of disgust, and I used that opportunity to slip away, but that didn't take the look off of her face.

"What—you don't like them like that?" I asked.

She answered immediately. "Absolutely not!"

Edgar seemed hurt by this. Like, actually depressed. I didn't know if there was anything between them, but I thought it best not to ask.

"Tenma, may I have a word? This is Isabella, Caesar's wife. She's the crown princess." Queen Maria introduced her daughter-in-law to me.

I turned towards Isabella. She really did look extremely young. She was very petite and had a baby face. It looked like her chest was...slightly smaller than Kriss's? Although Kriss didn't have much of a chest to begin with, so...

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Tenma."

"Yes, I've heard about you. I am Isabella von Blumere Krastin. You can just call me Isabella. I'm so sorry that my children caused you trouble." Isabella didn't seem to be stuck up at all, like some nobles. Personally, I thought it was a bit strange.

"You look confused, Tenma. Is it that strange to have a noble apologize to you? Well, in Isabella's case, she was chosen from many candidates to marry Caesar due to her personality, and she only just so happened to be the daughter of a duke."

The queen told me that she had educated the princes herself. It was almost unheard of for a queen to do that. Normally, it would be left to experts, but the queen wouldn't hear of it. I asked why.

"This is the king's children we're talking about! If they weren't properly educated, who knows how they would've turned out! I wouldn't have been able to rest if I'd left them in someone else's hands! The first two turned out fine, but that youngest one of mine really resembles the king..."

Anyone who knew the king's personality would have been satisfied with that answer. I suppose it would have been nerve-racking to have three princes with that kind of personality. It could even have turned out to be a national nightmare.

"It looks like you understand. Now, shall we go? Goodness, that took up much more time than I'd anticipated! Let's hurry!" Queen Maria climbed into the carriage. It was the perfect size for six passengers, but as soon as we started moving I became keenly aware

of just how comfortable my carriage was in comparison. Not only did it shake a considerable amount, even in town, but as there were no cushions on the seats, it was fairly painful.

“First, let’s go look at clothes. Cruyff!”

“Yes, Your Majesty. We shall go around to all the most popular shops first.” Cruyff began to drive. Kriss and the other knights of the king’s guard were positioned outside, around the carriage.

“How do you usually choose your clothing, Tenma?” the queen asked, sitting beside me.

“I tend to choose clothes that are easy to move around in, and I like clothes that are well-made. Otherwise, I just make sure they don’t look weird.”

I hadn’t worn tailor-made clothing since I lived in Kukuri Village. Back then, I always wore clothes that Mom, Aunt Martha, or the other village ladies had made for me. I’d never had tailor-made clothing in my previous life either, so I just never thought about spending the money on it.

“Hm, I see. Well, we’re going to have your clothes made for you today. And of course I’ll pay.”

“I can pay, mother. I’d really like to make it up to Tenma for all the trouble the children caused for him, after all...” Isabella said, and then the conversation took off without me. Of course, I wanted to politely decline, but then the queen began saying how she wanted to apologize for the king and Prince Lyle’s ambush(?). Then Isabella said she wanted to thank me *personally* for saving her children’s lives. Not only that, but I was informed that if I didn’t allow them to apologize or show their gratitude, their enemies would get wind of it and call them a selfish clan that couldn’t even show respect to their benefactors.

Thus, the queen and the princess urged me to please accept this token of gratitude, and to allow them to buy me clothes.

“How about I pay for your everyday clothing, and Isabella can buy your formal attire?”

Under normal circumstances, it would have been the other way around, but since the queen wanted to apologize for the king’s prank, and the princess wanted to thank me for saving her children’s lives, they decided that Isabella should be the one to shell out more money, since the children’s lives were more valuable.

Also, I had to wonder what the queen’s idea of “everyday” clothing was. Cruyff informed me that if I wasn’t careful, the queen would spend as much as she would on a noble’s “everyday” clothing.

“Queen Maria, we are almost there. Please allow us to go ahead.” Kriss ordered the other two female knights to ride ahead. They urged their horses into a gallop. One went to the shop, while the other

headed to where the carriage would be stopping.

When we arrived, we parked the carriage in the space reserved for nobles. It was quite a large clothing store. The sign said that the royal family shopped there, and the royal family's crest was also visible.

"Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness! Thank you so much for coming today! We are simply honored to have you!" A man who I assumed was the owner of the shop waited for us inside, along with his employees, who were lined up next to him.

"Yes, it's been some time, hasn't it? I'd love to see your newest items as well as the latest trends," the queen said.

Several employees immediately sprang into action, returning with various items of clothing as well as accessories. While the employees explained what they were to the queen, the owner came over to greet Isabella.

"It's so lovely to see you again, Princess Isabella, Princess Luna. Please wait just a moment and I will bring over a selection of items I'm sure will suit both of you."

"Thank you. But first, I'd like to discuss some formal wear..." Isabella said, before introducing me to the owner.

"Ah, I see... Formal attire for the gentleman over here..."

The owner had a strange look on his face as he looked at me. Apparently he'd thought I was a bodyguard and was startled to hear that the princess wanted to buy me clothes.

But he quickly pulled himself together and showed us to the back of the shop. "I'll go ahead and take your measurements first," he said, getting out a tape measure. Afterwards, he brought out several outfits in my size. "These are just samples, but do you see anything you like?"

Isabella held up each outfit against me. "I think this looks good. But how about this one?"

"I think that one looks better!"

Isabella and Luna exchanged opinions, getting so caught up in their conversation that they completely forgot to ask me what I thought.

"Isabella, Luna. You're leaving Tenma out." The queen had finished looking around and came over to us, cautioning her daughter-in-law and granddaughter.

"Oh, I'm sorry. We must've gotten carried away."

"I'm sorry."

Only then did the two of them realize they hadn't asked my opinion.

"It's all right. I don't know much about clothes. I just don't like anything too flashy, so if we could just avoid that..."

The shop owner put back several samples after he heard me say

that and brought back some choices in more muted colors.

“How about this?” Isabella chose one in blue. It seemed like it would be pretty comfortable to move around in, so I tried that on.

“Yes, I like it.”

I showed them the result, and all three of them seemed to like it.

“Do you think you could make him an outfit like this one, in this color?” Isabella asked the shop owner, who brought out an order sheet. In the meantime, I looked around the shop. We spent about an hour more there before leaving.

“Now, next is the everyday clothing. Cruyff, head to the next shop.”

This shop was smaller than the last, but it had more clothing.

“Let’s look around, Tenma!” The queen, princess, and even Luna were especially excited, and began sharing opinions.

I tried on several outfits, which took about an hour.

“Well, now that we’ve bought Tenma his outfits, it’s time for *us* to shop!” Queen Maria said in high spirits, giving orders to Cruyff.

After that, we headed to a women’s clothing shop. It even had underwear. I was a bit too shy to enter and told them I’d wait outside, but Queen Maria and Princess Isabella shoved me inside anyway. I couldn’t exactly say no, so I had to go in with them. And surprisingly, there were other men besides myself there.

Most of them seemed to be there because their girlfriends had dragged them along. They gave me looks of sympathy, but at the same time seemed reassured that they weren’t alone in this experience. And I had a feeling that the remaining males in the store would actually be angry if they were referred to as males—the other male customers were looking at them with pink cheeks, so I thought that my hunch was probably spot-on.

“Tenma, how does this look?”

“Tenma, what do you think about this outfit?”

“Isn’t this cute, Tenma?”

“Tenma, do you think these clothes are too young for me?”

“Of course they’re not, mother! They look wonderful on you.”

“You’re so cute, grandmother!”

“Do you think this is too plain, Tenma?”

“Hm, I think maybe a bolder design would look better on you, Isabella.”

“That doesn’t look good, mommy.”

“What do you think, Tenma?”

“Luna! You’re not old enough to wear that!”

“That’s true... Wait five more years.”

...Why was I even here? I wondered that to myself as the three of them continued picking out clothes without really paying much attention to me. They would ask my opinion, but the conversation would progress before I got the chance to answer.



All I could really say was “Yes” or “I agree.” To make matters worse, Luna wasn’t that self-aware yet, so she kept bringing frilly underwear over to me and asking my opinion of it. Her mother and grandmother immediately stopped her every time, of course, but still...

The three of them were dressed to disguise their identities as royals, but anyone could tell they were at least nobles with one glance. Also, as all three were beautiful too, they drew extra attention. I noticed many customers watching with amusement as the three of them dragged me around with them.

“It’s about time to leave, my ladies,” Cruyff appeared seemingly out of thin air to announce.

“Oh, is it that late already?” Princess Isabella handed over the outfits she wanted to a clerk. Cruyff went to pay the bill while the female knights stayed by the women. Meanwhile, I followed Kriss outside to the carriage, where Edgar waited.

And so my shopping trip with the queen ended, leaving me exhausted. I felt like I was even more exhausted now than I had been after training this morning. However, the women were all cheerful as could be. Luna didn’t look one bit tired as she animatedly chatted with Isabella about the shopping trip.

“Today was so fun! Let’s do it again! Right, Tenma?!”

It was hard for me to respond right away. The women smiled when they saw my reaction, but Edgar gave me a look of sympathy. Meanwhile, the other men seemed to have nothing but amusement at my reaction.

We climbed into the carriage and headed back to the palace. On the way back, the queen was unusually quiet, but suddenly she spoke up. “Do you hate us, Tenma?”

I was startled by her sudden question. I hadn’t the faintest idea what she meant by that.

“I’m talking about the incident at Kukuri Village. After all, Margrave Haust was the one who hired the soldiers who caused the tragedy, and as it was the king who gave that order, it’s ultimately our fault. So I ask you again... Do you hate the king? Do you hate the royal family?”

The queen’s question silenced everyone inside the carriage, and the knights outside as well. It seemed they were all anxiously awaiting my answer.

Once I understood what she meant, I spoke. “I don’t hate you.”

“Why not? It’s our fault that your parents died!” Queen Maria objected. She didn’t seem to accept my answer.

“Would you be happy if I said I did, then? So much that I wanted

to kill every last one of you? Would you be satisfied then?"

"If that was truly how you felt..."

I'd said it half as a joke, but the queen had a serious look on her face.

"I wouldn't blame you if you felt that way, Tenma. Obviously I wouldn't just allow you to kill us, but at the same time, I'd understand why you'd want to."

Isabella nodded in agreement. "If I were in your position and Tida and Luna had died because of you, I'd hate you so much I'd want to kill you."

"Yes, but you weren't the ones who killed my parents. Their deaths were caused indirectly by the soldiers hired by Margrave Haust, and directly by the dragon zombie. It's a shame that I couldn't kill the soldiers myself, but I was able to kill the dragon zombie with my own two hands. Even if I did hate someone, it would be Margrave Haust, who was the one who had those soldiers go to Kukuri Village."

"But..." The queen started to speak, but I interrupted her.

"It's true that for a time, I hated all nobles and knights and soldiers. But once I set out on my journey and met different nobles and knights along the way, I realized something. Some nobles are scum, and some are really good people. The same goes for commoners. So there's really no point in hating the royal family. I don't hate you."

The queen listened to me quietly.

"Plus, if I did hate the king and the royal family, then I would have attacked after they'd shot that arrow at me." It sounded like a joke, but I meant it. If the attack on me had been serious and I'd cut off the king's head, it would've been in self-defense, since he'd tried to kill me first. But of course, since he was the king, it wouldn't matter what my reason was—I'd be treated as a criminal and given the most severe punishment.

At any rate, at the current moment I felt no hatred towards the royal family, and I didn't dislike all nobles just because they were nobles.

As time had passed after the incident in the village, I'd gotten better at sorting through my emotions, and thought I had grown emotionally. But sometimes I'd remember what had happened, and a wave of sadness would come over me.

The queen and Isabella seemed to be pondering what I'd said.

"I see... I see, so you don't hate us. I'm so glad... I don't know how I could bear it if my best friend's child hated me...!" Queen Maria said, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

For a while, silence remained inside the carriage. The only sounds were the horse's hoofbeats and the creaking of the carriage wheels.

The queen took her handkerchief away from her eyes and looked me straight in the face. “Tenma, would you let me adopt you? I can convince the king.”

Everyone seemed shocked by the queen’s sudden offer, including Isabella, Cruyff, Kriss, and the rest of the knights.

“What are you saying, all of a sudden?!”

“It’s not sudden at all. I’ve been thinking about it for some time now. I want to help Celia and Ricardo’s child. Of course, I can’t give you a place in line for succession to the throne, but I can promise you a life of nobility where you would want for nothing.” I could tell by the look in the queen’s eyes that she was serious. I’m sure part of it was sadness and pity, but more than that, she wanted to protect me in Mom and Dad’s place. I could feel that emotion from her.

“Thank you so much, but I’ll have to say no.” Shocked glances turned in my direction, but the queen seemed calm.

“May I ask why?”

“Your Majesty’s offer is incredibly kind and generous. But I’ve decided to live on my own and not be adopted by anyone. I am the son of Ricardo and Celia from Kukuri Village, and so I could never become anyone else’s son.”

The queen looked both relieved and disappointed by my answer, but quickly pulled herself together.

“I understand. But I just want you to know that’s how deeply I care about you. And if you ever need anything at all, please don’t hesitate to come to me. I’ll do everything in my power to help.”

“Thank you...”

After that, the carriage was filled with an awkward silence, which remained until we reached the castle. Luna slept peacefully the whole way home, blissfully unaware of the conversation that had just taken place.

We arrived back at the castle about an hour before sunset. Cruyff parked the carriage before the front doors of the castle, where Aina was waiting for us.

“Welcome back, everyone.” She welcomed us with a bow. The queen and Isabella greeted her as they passed. But when I was about to pass her, Aina suddenly lifted her head. “There’s something I need to ask you about Jeanne and Aura, Master Tenma.”

There was an intimidating lilt in her voice that stopped me in my tracks.

Queen Maria and the others didn’t miss the tone of her voice either and stopped in their tracks. The queen gave Aina a concerned look.

Aina bowed her head. “Forgive me for startling you. It’s just, I have something I’d like to ask Master Tenma. No—something I *need* to

ask him!”

Aina seemed rather excitable for some reason, which left both me and the queen puzzled.

“Master Tenma, what in the world did you do to Jeanne and Aura—or rather, to just Aura?!” Aina demanded, making me back up a few steps. “My sister is foolish and a terrible maid, but her skin and hair look unbelievably lustrous! What kind of magic did you use on her?!”

Because the content of her question was such a complete mismatch for its delivery, I nearly fell flat on my face.

“Wh-What?! *That’s* what you wanted to talk to me about?! I’m sorry I was even worried...”

“Why do you say that? Aura never, ever took care of herself to that degree! Please tell me, Master Tenma!” she interrupted me forcefully. She and Aura were definitely sisters. When they got worked up about something, their behavior was identical!

“Are you having rude thoughts about me, Master Tenma? Well, no matter—just please answer the question!”

Queen Maria looked quite alarmed by this unusual outburst from Aina, and placed her hands on Aina’s shoulders, physically pulling her away from me. “Aina, you simply must settle down. But to tell you the truth, Tenma, I’m rather curious as well...” I couldn’t believe that the queen was jumping on the bandwagon too. “I certainly noticed that Jeanne’s and Aura’s hair and skin were beautiful, but now that I’m looking more closely... So is yours, Tenma! Did you teach them your skincare routine?!”

At these words, every woman in the area, including Princess Isabella, Kriss, and several knights, rushed over to hear more details.

“I did give them a few pointers, but I’m surprised anyone noticed. Did Aura tell you about it, Aina?”

In response, Aina puffed out her already voluptuous chest. “Of course she did! There’s no way Aura would have been able to do that on her own! She must really depend on you!”

That explanation made sense to me, but I was starting to feel a bit frightened being surrounded by all these women. Thus, I decided to share my skin and haircare pointers with the group.

“It’s a bit unconventional, but it works. Rocket, come out!” I called Rocket out of the dimension bag and introduced him to everyone. “This is my follower. His name is Rocket. Rocket is actually very special. I’m not sure exactly how, but he can completely absorb the smallest particles of dirt and impurities from your skin and hair.”

Though they looked somewhat incredulous, the women kept listening quietly.

“In addition, if you apply his special secretions to your hair after you wash it, it’ll gain a lustrous shine. The longer you keep it up, the

more effective the results! This soap is gentle on the skin and will give you that natural glow you've been looking for!" All of a sudden, I felt as though I was on a home shopping channel. However, as I'd already tried the stuff on Jeanne, Aura, and even Shiromaru with great results, I could guarantee its effectiveness. It was just a bit awkward to explain because of what went into it and how it was made...

The doubtful mood in the air vanished, and suddenly the women began reacting with indescribable fervor.

"Really? So there was nothing special about Aura after all! I should've known that, but... Anyway, can I have some of that soap?"

The other girls started piling on. "That's not fair, Aina! Tenma, give me some too!"

"And me, Tenma!"

"Please give us some too!"

The women began swarming me. I didn't mind this personally, but although I had plenty of soap, I hadn't bottled any of the slime liquid lately. This was my last bottle. After I explained this to them, Aina snatched it out of my hands and put it in her pocket.

"Aina, give that back this instant!" Queen Maria ordered, but Aina ignored her.

"I should test it to make sure it's completely safe before the queen uses it, just in case! You can never be too careful, so just let me check it out. Your Majesty may use it once I have thoroughly vetted it for safety!"

I understood what Aina was getting at, I really did—but it wasn't very convincing after the way she'd been acting a few moments ago. The queen wasn't convinced either.

"In that case, we should test it for safety!" the female knights chimed in. The three of them surrounded Aura.

"Hey, Aina. If you want to do research on its effectiveness, don't you think we'd be better candidates since our hair and skin takes such a beating during our training? Now hand it over!"

Two knights lunged at her from behind, but Aina easily dodged them, and stepped away from Kriss.

"No wonder you were nominated to be the knights' squad leader..."

Watching the two of them glare at each other, this statement took me by surprise. The other knights tried to circle around behind Aina again, but were unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, Queen Maria and Princess Isabella were carefully watching and waiting to see if they would be able to steal the bottle away themselves.

"Got it!"

While everyone else was distracted, Luna came up out of nowhere

and snatched the bottle from Aura's pocket.

"I got it back for you, Tenma!" She came up to me with a huge grin and handed it over.

"That's okay. You can have it, Luna. There's only a little bit left, but you'll probably be able to get a couple uses out of it. Try it out today!"

Adults would probably only get one or two uses out of what was left, but a child would get more out of it.

And just in case, I decided to issue a warning. "None of you would dare to take it away from a *child*, right?"

The ladies realized they now had no choice but to give up, but then Aina appeared to have an idea.

"Master Tenma... Have you given Jeanne and Aura bottles of that stuff?"

"Yes, I ha—" Before I could even finish, everyone except Luna and two of the knights sprang into action. I was almost entirely sure they were off to see Jeanne and Aura. Since Luna already had a bottle, she wasn't interested, and the remaining two knights didn't have the courage to get into a footrace with the queen and princess inside the royal palace.

"Oh, darn, looks like they left. I had plenty of soap too..."

Actually, since the formula for the soap was basically the same as the liquid version, it had similar effects.

The knights became interested at these words, so I gave them each a bar of soap. I gave one each to Luna, Cruyff, and Edgar too, but then I was left with only my own half-used bar of soap.

This might have been a bit rude, but the saying "slow and steady wins the race" really applied here. And since this statement was directed towards the queen and the princess, it really *was* very rude. But after all, they were still women, and hair and skincare was very important to them.

After the knights (excluding the one who was currently racing through the palace) thanked me, they went ahead and returned to their duties. Now I was alone with Luna, so I held her hand, deciding to take her back to her room.

We ran into the queen and the princess on the way there, and after I safely dropped Luna off, I returned to my room and came back with two bars of soap to give to the ladies, who were very delighted to accept them.

They told me that Jeanne didn't have any left, and while Aina and Kriss fought over Aura's bottle, it slipped from their hands and fell on the floor. Ultimately, none of them got one. After that, Kriss was so scary that the female knights and Edgar decided not to even tell her about the soap.

Part Seven

A while after the sun went down, Gramps and I went to the party Uncle Mark, Aunt Martha, and the former residents of Kukuri Village had prepared for us, although we *were* a bit late due to all the commotion. By the time we arrived, Uncle Mark and his friends were already drunk, but luckily Aunt Martha saved us.

She and her friends surrounded me, touching me all over to make sure I was real. After they were satisfied, they all started sobbing. I was getting whiplash trying to keep up with them, but then Uncle Mark came up from behind me and rested his hand on my head.

“Sorry they’re such a mess. But everyone really thought you were dead.” He told me that they hadn’t truly believed him even when they were setting up the party, and they were all on pins and needles waiting for me to show up.

The mood in the air was so tense that Uncle Mark and the other men couldn’t handle it, which was why they’d started drinking. That explained why they were trashed by the time we got there.

But the ladies weren’t drinking, so after they’d touched me to make sure I was real, all of that built-up anxiety came to a head and they started bawling instead.

“I’m so glad you’re alive, Tenma!” Aunt Martha said as she pressed a card into my hand. “This is from Celia. She told me to give it to you.” I looked down and saw that it was Mom’s guild card. She must’ve meant for it to be a memento.

“Thanks, Aunt Martha.” I took out Dad’s guild card from my magic bag and carefully wrapped it up together with Mom’s, then put them both away.

“At any rate, this is a joyous day! Let’s party like we used to back in Kukuri Village!” Uncle Mark called. Then, the party truly began. Everyone let loose and started eating, drinking, singing, and dancing like in the old days when we would have Kukuri Village’s festival. It was so loud I was sure it would be a neighborhood disturbance, but Gramps had made a magical sound barrier around the garden so no one would tell us to stop. It wasn’t completely soundproof, but as it did a great job at keeping the volume down, we received no complaints.

There were about forty people at the party. More than half of Kukuri Village’s population died in the tragedy, and there were only about ninety survivors. But a few dozen more died afterwards due to zombification or complications from their injuries.

Since half of the population had been wiped out and a great

number of houses and buildings were destroyed, it made the village virtually inhabitable. Initially, the survivors went to Russell City, and then this group of forty people had eventually moved to the capital.

“Moving here made us realize just how low our cost of living was in Kukuri Village,” Uncle Mark said. Luckily, because the majority of the people here were ex-adventurers, and even the ones who weren’t still had experience hunting and gathering in the forest near Kukuri Village, they were able to make enough money to support themselves.

The conversation naturally gravitated towards what had happened in my life in the meantime. Once I got on the topic of Rocket and Shiromaru, I took them out of the bag and let them participate in the party.

Everyone looked quite shocked to see Solomon, but since he was very well behaved, by the end of the party he was eating alongside everyone. The party lasted late into the night until everyone was lying passed out drunk on the lawn. I had a pretty high tolerance for alcohol and didn’t pass out myself, but since I was exhausted, I used Shiromaru as a pillow and fell asleep.

I slept really well that night. Maybe it had something to do with the nostalgic mood in the air. Someone must’ve put a blanket on me after I fell asleep, because I had one on when I woke up.

By the time we woke, the sun was high in the sky. The cool morning had already passed us by, and it was a little hot. The moment I opened my eyes, Shiromaru leapt up and said, “Woof!” Apparently he was hungry—he was barking loudly and wagging his tail. I heard groans from around me in response.

The groans sounded eerily like zombies, which put me on edge for a moment, but then I realized it was just the painful cries of people who were hungover.

“Why are you being so loud?!” I heard Aunt Martha yell at Uncle Mark. This was followed by more groans.

Anyone passing by might have seen or heard the groaning and alerted the knights about something suspicious going on. Wanting to avoid that, I got some medicine that was effective for hangovers out of my magic bag. After I passed it out, the groans gradually began to fade. Uncle Mark and the others began to sip on water or soup. It was a miracle no one had thrown up yet.

Meanwhile, Aunt Martha and the other women were fine. It seemed like they could hold their alcohol much better than the men. They scolded the men for getting too drunk as they cleaned up from the party and began fixing breakfast—or given how late it was, perhaps it was actually lunch. They chatted and laughed as they went about their tasks.

Aunt Martha took a look at me. “Good morning, Tenma. It doesn’t

seem like you're hungover," she said, before handing me a plate with breakfast on it. "Here you go. Bread, soup, and leftovers from last night."

Shiromaru poked his head out from behind me as if to say, "*Hurry up! I'll eat your scraps!*" Solomon was in line behind Shiromaru.

"Shiromaru, you've always had a huge appetite, but it seems like Solomon has been giving you a run for your money lately."

Aunt Martha and the other ladies were putting aside meat and vegetable scraps from yesterday for Shiromaru and Solomon. At first, when they'd seen Solomon, they'd seemed a little on edge and scared, but now they didn't blink twice.

"When I saw the dragon, I was a little—well, *very*—startled and scared, but now that I've gotten to know him a bit, he's pretty cute. He's a lot prettier than that other one, that's for sure." She was talking about the dragon zombie. I didn't like the comparison, but I suppose it couldn't be helped. In fact, I was surprised by how quickly they'd changed their minds about Solomon, considering everything that had happened.

"By the way, are you planning on living here in the capital, Tenma?"

"No, I'll be staying in the city until after the tournament, but then I'll return to Sagan and continue exploring the dungeon there," I answered as I ate.

The ladies looked surprised and a bit conflicted. "Why don't you just do that while living here in the capital?"

"That's right! We're finally all back together again!"

They began kicking up a fuss in their attempt to convince me.

"That's enough!" Uncle Mark intervened, standing up and clutching his head. "Tenma isn't a little kid anymore! He's talented enough to have a dragon as a follower, which means he's going to be an amazing adventurer that will go down in history someday! We can't decide his future based on our own selfish desires. Most importantly, he doesn't belong to us. All we can do is watch over him...in place of them."

His argument was so convincing that the women were silenced, and even the menfolk fell quiet as well.

The mood turned awkward, but this was broken by the sound of Gramps's voice. Personally, I'd forgotten he was even still here...

"Waaater..."

Apparently, he was still suffering the effects of his hangover. I'd neglected to give him medicine... But thankfully, it helped ease the tense atmosphere.

"It's not like we're never going to see him again. We'll be able to get together to drink and laugh like old times!"

Reluctantly, Aunt Martha and the other ladies agreed, deciding to support me. After everyone was done with breakfast, they began going their separate ways until it was just me, Gramps, Uncle Mark, and Aunt Martha left.

“What will you do now, Tenma?”

“I’m going to gain experience with more training and quests. And then I’ll participate in the martial arts tournament.” There was still a month and a half before the tournament. I’d seen places in town preparing for a festival, and thought maybe a festival was coming up as well.

“I see... Well, at the very least you’ll be in the capital until the festival is over, won’t you?” Aunt Martha asked. It seemed like she had something on her mind, but she didn’t bring it up. After that, we chatted for a bit, and then they both went home.

Gramps had been quiet this whole time. I glanced over and saw he was leaned up against a nearby tree trunk in pain. He was still suffering from his hangover. It looked like the medicine wasn’t working—his symptoms hadn’t worn off yet. The person who had taught me the recipe for the medicine was Mom, and apparently Gramps had used it regularly, so his body had built up a tolerance.

I couldn’t take Gramps with me at this rate—instead, I brought him inside and put him to bed in the first bedroom I found. I asked Rocket to watch over him just in case and left some water and medicine for him, so I assumed he’d be fine.

Gramps’s house was about ten kilometers away from the palace if you traveled in a straight line, but about twelve if you followed the road. It would have been faster to fly there, but not wanting to attract unnecessary attention, I decided to run all the way there to get some exercise.

There weren’t a lot of people around Gramps’s house, but there certainly were once you got back out onto the main road, which was to be expected since this was the kingdom’s capital city. They kept getting in the way as I ran, but I just treated them like obstacles to run around, which made it a pretty good workout. So good, in fact, that I got carried away and managed to run all the way from Gramps’s house to the gate on the complete opposite side of the city. The guards there became suspicious of me, which took some time to sort out as well.

Some knights from the first unit just happened to be passing by and assured them that I was in fact a guest of the king—but I guess if some sweaty, panting kid showed up claiming to be the king’s guest, I’d have been suspicious too.

The guards apologized, but I told them it was fine, and they let me through the gate. A little while later, I belatedly realized I still had

Duke Sanga's crest, and decided to try to use that from now on.

By the time I finally reached the castle, three hours had passed since I'd left Gramps's house. Of course, the castle guards recognized me and let me in right away. Jeanne and Aura came down to greet me.

"Welcome home, Master Tenma."

"Welcome home."

They both bowed their heads in unison. It wasn't like I lived at the palace, but I figured Aina had instructed them both to practice.

"Master Tenma, Queen Maria is waiting for you. Please follow me," Aura said, leading the way. It was a bit unnerving to see her acting like this, and I wondered if she'd eaten something bad. Jeanne was quietly following behind. To be honest, it was all creepy. I sensed Aina, who was probably watching over them, nearby.

Aura led me to Queen Maria's room, which was on the floor above the one where the throne room was located. It seemed like this floor was where the royal family's living quarters were located.

"Pardon me, Your Majesty. I've brought Master Tenma to see you." Aura knocked on the door. Though I wasn't sure what exactly she'd done wrong, I sensed Aina growing annoyed nearby.

"Come in." I heard the queen's voice coming from inside the room. Just then, Aina silently walked over.

"Excuse me, Queen Maria. Please go ahead, Master Tenma." Aina opened the door and showed me inside. "Master Tenma, I'll be borrowing Aura and Jeanne, if you don't mind."

The color drained from both girls' faces, but they didn't complain as they followed after Aina.

"Come in, Tenma."

"Excuse me." I went inside the room and found the queen and Princess Isabella sitting in chairs.

"Thank you for coming, Tenma. There's something I'd like to ask you." The queen urged me to sit down across from her. Once I did, she began to speak. "What are your plans from now on?"

"My plans? Well, first I'm going to train until the martial arts tournament..." I started telling her, but she shook her head.

"No, no—that's not what I mean. I mean your plans for the future! More specifically, regarding marriage."

"Huh? Marriage? I've never thought about it before. Why?"

Both of them exchanged glances as if to say, "*I knew it!*"

"Tenma. Several nobles have their eyes on you."

"Oh, that's probably because I fought a noble in Gunjo City. I'm sure I have a terrible reputation with them."

Both of them looked exasperated. "No, no—that's not what we mean! That piddly little baronet isn't anything to sneeze at. When I

say that nobles have their eyes on you, I mean that they want you to marry their daughters!”

“The lower-ranking nobles will be plotting to see how they can get their daughters close to you to use you.”

I was keenly aware of that—I couldn’t play dumb. “You mean because of Solomon and my connection to the royal family?”

I didn’t think many nobles knew about my skills as an adventurer besides Duke Sanga and Marquis Sammons. I had to think the answer lay more in the fact that I had a dragon, as well as connections to the king.

“Yes, that’s right. Most of the higher-ranking nobles in our faction are intent on getting you aligned with us to strengthen our faction.” The queen seemed a bit irritated about this. “But what say you, Tenma? Will you get married? Or even engaged?!”

“Mother, that sounds like you’re asking Tenma to marry *you*...”

“Well, that wouldn’t be very wise, would it? Anyway, Tenma... Are you interested in any women from either the royalists or the neutral faction?”

Even though the atmosphere felt like they were joking around, I still took a moment to consider the single women I’d met on my journey thus far.

“No. I’ve never thought about it until now anyway, so...”

The moment those words left my lips, I saw glints in both of their eyes.

“Well, I understand. This is awfully sudden, after all. But Tenma, just remember that this is the world that you’ve entered. And be aware that there are those who won’t stop unless you are adopted by a noble who belongs to the royalists, or until you are engaged to a girl whose family belongs to the royalists.”

Maybe I was just seeing things, because now the ladies had pleasant, calm smiles on their faces as the queen issued that warning. After that, we chatted about various things for about an hour until I finally excused myself.



“Looks like he’s gone...”

“Indeed...”

After Tenma left the room, Maria and Isabella stayed behind to finish their tea.

“Did you see his face when we brought up the matter of women?”

“Yes, I did! It seemed like he had a certain someone in mind!”

It seemed as though they were right about him, after all.

“I’m not sure who it is, but we *did* narrow down a list of candidates!”

"I'm certain he must have feelings for one of them!"

"In that case, maybe we can get him to marry her? I think it's possible!"

"I agree, mother. We have a much better chance now than we would if we started from square one!"

The two of them were getting quite excited, like young women in love for the first time...

"Now, this is just a hunch, but I think Tenma likes older women. There were only older women in Kukuri Village, after all."

"But what if that's the reason he prefers younger women?"

The two of them shared their opinions.

"Oh, good point. Well, personally. I think his first choice would be Primera, then Kriss, and then Leena. What about you, Isabella?"

"I think his first choice would be the catgirl triplets, then Primera, then Jeanne."

They revealed their predictions to each other.

"Not Leena?"

"I think the only way that would happen is if Leena strong-armed him into it. There's a thin line between an admirer and a stalker with that one... Also, do you think it's unfair of me to have three girls as my number one pick?"

"Well, they *are* triplets, after all, so if they get married he'll have to marry them all at the same time! An instant harem! They've known each other for a long time—it might work fairly well!"

They became more and more worked up over the details, flying right past marriage and straight to childbirth.

"I'm sure Tenma would be able to handle three women at once!"

"I bet he's such a sweetheart when you get him alone!"

"I'm going to name Tenma's firstborn!"

If a stranger had happened to pass by and witness this conversation, they would never have guessed it was between the queen and the crown princess—that was how odd of a turn it was. They continued in this fashion until Aina came to check on them.

Part Eight

After I escaped from the marriage talk with Queen Maria and Princess Isabella, things became quite hectic. First, I went to get Jeanne and Aura, but Jeanne was completely exhausted. Aura was even more so, and she also seemed emotionally unstable.

The moment she saw me, she looked around then burst into tears. Apparently, Aina's training was incredibly rough. It seemed they had some kind of post-traumatic stress from it.

"M-Master Tenma, please take us away from here!"

"I can't. Aina said your next training session is in two days. Good luck!"

Aura began blubbering nonsense. I placed my hand on her shoulder, trying to say this as calmly as possible. To be honest, I was afraid of Aina too.

I could tell Jeanne was shaken, but Aura gave no response.

"There's no response. It's just a corpse." I muttered a line from a game famous in my previous world, but Aura still didn't say a word. Instead, she had quite skillfully fainted while still standing, like a well-made sculpture. "I'll call it 'Despair'!" I joked.

Jeanne responded with a wry smile.

From the next day onward, with the aid of Aina and the others, our lives began to get back into a routine.

This was my schedule:

Days 1 and 2: Accept guild quests

Day 3: Rest

Day 4: Train with Dean and the others

Days 5 and 6: Accept guild quests

Day 7: Rest

Days 8 and 9: Train with Dean and the others

Day 10: Rest

Repeat starting from Day 1

And this was Jeanne and Aura's schedule:

Day 1: Accept guild quests with Tenma

Day 2: Train with Aina

Day 3: Rest

Day 4: Train with Aina

Day 5: Accept guild quests with Tenma

Day 6: Train with Aina

Day 7: Rest
Days 8 and 9: Train with Aina
Day 10: Rest
Repeat starting from Day 1

At first, Aina had suggested that Jeanne and Aura's schedule be as follows:

Days 1 through 6: Train with Aina
Day 7: Rest
Days 8 through 10: Train with Aura

In other words, nine days of training. I was planning to accept, but Aura complained that it was way too much. As a result, we negotiated and adopted the plan above.

"I'd expect nothing less from you, Master Tenma! Master Tenma saved me from the demon Aina. He is truly a god!" Aura said. She must really have hated the training, because she was practically bursting with joy over being released from Aina's clutches. However, that joy didn't last for very long.

On the first day, I went to the guild to accept a quest as scheduled, and saw Aina there wearing a maid's uniform and carrying a halberd. "I thought I'd take the opportunity to accompany you, Master Tenma. I can train Aura during our free time on the quest."

She'd forcibly signed herself up to be in our party and came along on the quest with us. Aura looked devastated by this, but since I couldn't say no, there was really no other choice but to let her come along. Later on, Aina informed me that she'd joined my party under Queen Maria's orders. The other nobles recognized her as the queen's personal maid, and if they saw her with my party, then they wouldn't dare lay a hand on us. But Aina decided not to share that tidbit with us right away, because she thought the whole situation was amusing.

As for the guild quests, I chose ones I hadn't tried before that could all be completed in a day. I didn't care about the reward money, so both the guild and the clients were quite pleased.

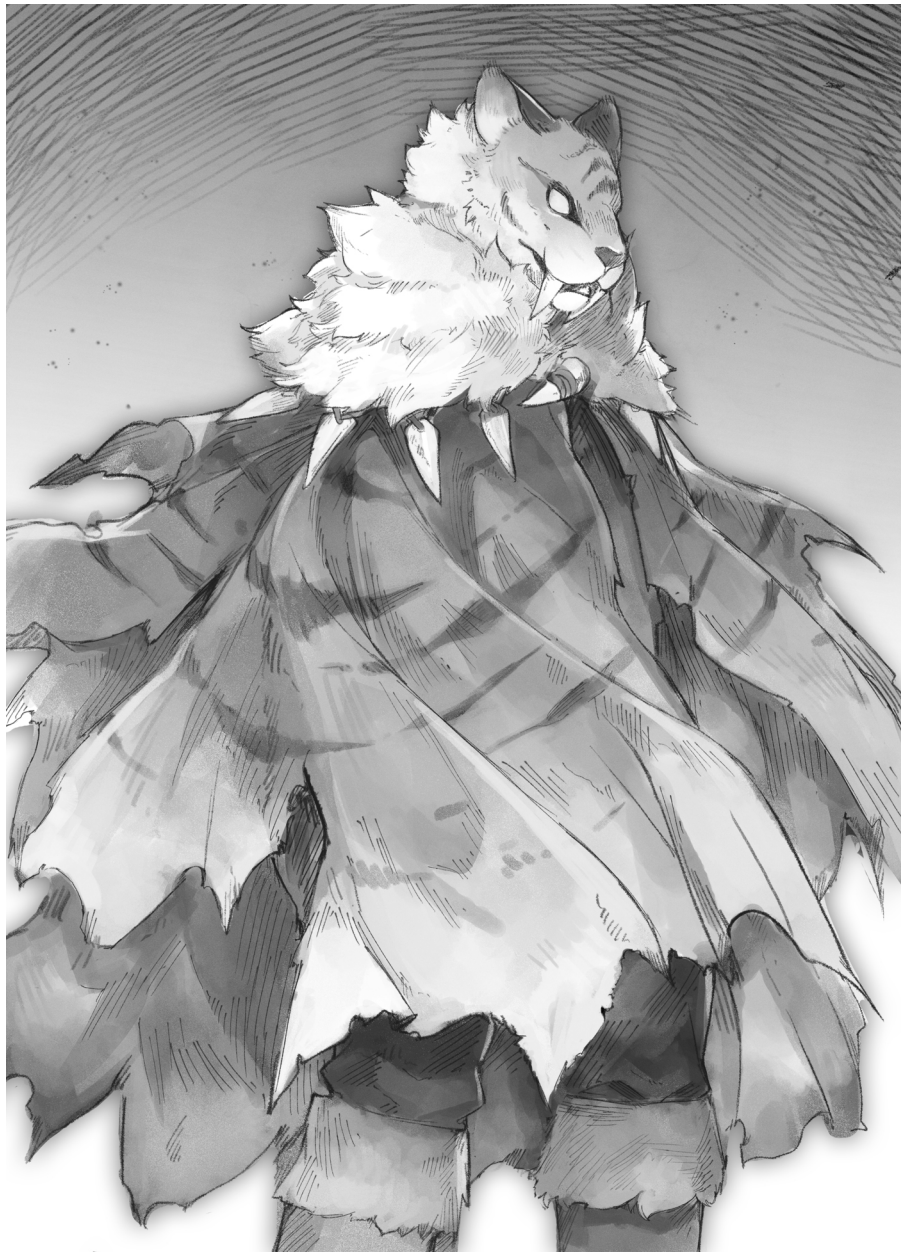
Since I had to account for travel around the capital, I would accept the quest the day before, then complete it the next day, finally returning to accept another request. Occasionally, I would use my rest day to accept quests that took more than a day to complete, but since Jeanne and Aura had to train with Aina on those days, they would always complain about it when I got home.

When I trained with Dean, most of the time I just joined in the knights' training, and sometimes they mixed in actual combat. Sometimes I would face off against the knights, at other times it would

be me and my followers versus the knights, and still other times my followers versus the knights...and so on. After a while, the people who worked at the castle gradually grew used to seeing Shiromaru, Rocket, and Solomon, and were no longer startled by them.

On rest days, I would be accompanied by a very stressed-out Jeanne and Aura on shopping trips, or sometimes members of the royal family (mainly the queen) or Gramps would come with me.

A month and a half later, I went to the guild to register for the martial arts tournament—and ran into a very strange-looking person there. They were two meters tall, wore tiger's fur over their entire body, and wore a tiger-shaped helmet on their head, which meant I couldn't tell whether they were male or female. No matter how I looked at it, they certainly seemed suspicious.



I decided to use Identify on them, but...

It's not working?!

For some reason, the usual status screen that would pop up when I used Identify was instead all bugged out and censored with black smudges, making it unreadable. Since this had never happened before, it really freaked me out. The tiger person gave me a brief glance and then left.

"Who was that?"

"They were really creepy, weren't they, Tenma?"

The others saw the individual too and were just as surprised as I was.

"Have you ever seen that person, Sis?"

"No, I haven't... But I've heard of them."

The adventurers standing nearby fell silent at Aina's words and waited intently for her to continue.

"I don't know their name, but they have the same characteristics as a certain Bandit King I've heard about."

"'Bandit King'? You mean a criminal?" Jeanne asked with confusion, but I doubted it.

"No, not a criminal. A criminal wouldn't just walk in here so freely. The capital guards and the guild don't mess around... At least, I hope they don't."

If I gave it some thought, I was sure I could figure it out, but some adventurers around us were eavesdropping with the same idea. A few of them cleared their throats and seemed restless.

"So why do they call him the Bandit King?"

"Because of his appearance and the quests he takes on. The Bandit King loves taking quests in the mountains or forests, and will slay any bandits lurking in those areas while he's there. Not only that, but he can wipe out groups of them in one shot..."

I didn't understand why they'd call him the Bandit King just for that, and it seemed other adventurers agreed.

"Hey, Miss Maid... Don't ya think calling him the Bandit King's a bit odd?" one of them called out to Aina. The other adventurers nodded in agreement.

"Yes, you're right, of course. At first, the guild simply thought he was a skilled adventurer with good instincts. But he caught *too* many bandits, to the point where they began to have doubts."

"Doubts?" I asked. Aina paused. Everyone around us held their breath, waiting for her to speak.

"They think perhaps he's the head of a giant bandit organization. In other words, he hunts down bandits who go against him, or eliminates bandits who break the organization's rules, then turns their

bodies in to the guild for money..." Gradually, Aina began to sound like she was telling a horror story.

More and more adventurers gathered around until every last one of them was focused intently on her. She went on.

"Because of that, the guild, all the domain lords in the area, and the royal knights investigated him. But they couldn't find a shred of evidence supporting the existence of such an organization. They also couldn't find anyone who had been attacked or wronged by someone wearing a tiger cloak, so they called off the investigation. Those who'd heard rumors of it, however, spread the word that there was a king of bandits, or a bandit who slew other bandits, and then people began to refer to him as the Bandit King." She let out a deep breath as if to signal she was done speaking. Then, almost on cue, the tension in the room dissipated.

"When did this happen, Aina?" I wondered aloud.

"About a hundred years ago."

I'd had a feeling that would be the case. After all, none of the adventurers here had ever heard of him before. Because of that, I had guessed that either Aina had made the whole thing up, or it had happened before these adventurers were even born.

"But what I said about the Bandit King was true. I'm sure the guild still has records on him."

At this suggestion, several of the adventurers and guild workers raced off to the guild library.

"Even if what you said was true," I said, "it's very unlikely that this individual is the same person."

"Why, Master Tenma? There are some people with very long life spans. Elves, for example."

Aura had a point, but...

"An elf wouldn't be that muscular, and he's too tall to be a dwarf. Even if he was a half-breed, his physique just doesn't fit those categories."

It was true that elves could live from four to five hundred years, dwarves had a life span of about two hundred years, and half-breeds about half that. However, elves lived in forests and were very slender. Dwarves were muscular but very short.

Sometimes these traits would show up in their distant descendants, but even when that happened, they tended to still physically resemble their ancestors very strongly.

"I'm not saying it's impossible, but it's more likely that someone else is just pretending to be the Bandit King, or just happens to resemble them."

"Oh, I see..." Aura seemed to agree. And since Aina was down with her story, the other adventurers began to disperse.

“Well, whatever the case, whether he’s the real Bandit King or not, we definitely need to keep an eye on him,” I murmured to myself.

Something I learned later was that this so-called Bandit King had come to register as an individual combatant for the martial arts competition, so I might be fighting him soon. Or at least, that’s what Aura told me in a hoity-toity voice.

After finding out about this, I registered for both the individual and team competitions. I didn’t have to put down the names of my teammates yet; I could just register them on the day of the tournament.

“Who’s going to be on your team, Tenma? Are we going to join you?”

“No, I’m going to fight with Rocket, Shiromaru, and Solomon. It’s not a full team, but I think it’ll make for an interesting fight.” Deep down, however, I knew that my odds of winning were overwhelmingly high. In our training sessions, I was going easy on the knights and king’s guard, yet winning handily every time. It would have been a different story if someone of Dean’s caliber were entering, but there weren’t many who were that strong, and Dean had already told me he wasn’t participating.

I was still concerned about the Bandit King, but it wouldn’t be too difficult for me to compete in both events. I just had to be sure not to let my guard down.

There were no hunting or collection quests that day, and I didn’t find anything else worth picking up. According to a guild worker, since the tournament was coming up, there were a lot of adventurers in town from other places, and all the good quests were scooped up quickly.

“I’m not interested in quests like cleaning up the city. I guess I’ll use those days to train instead,” I said. All of a sudden, I thought I saw a gleam in Aina’s eye.

“In that case, will you allow me to train Jeanne and Aura during that time, Master Tenma?” She was asking me for permission, but I knew that she had already made up her mind on the matter.

Jeanne and Aura were both hiding from Aina, sending desperate pleas in my direction to say no, but I ignored them.

“Sure. I was going to head to the castle in my free time, anyway.”

“Thank you! Well, why don’t we start today?”

I nodded at Aina’s suggestion and then left the guild. Jeanne and Aura’s shoulders both drooped with disappointment, but they silently followed Aina anyway. They’d been pretty strictly trained over the past month.

After that point, I changed my schedule. Unfortunately for Jeanne and Aura, they had to train with Aina more often, but I took the

opportunity to learn new magic spells.

I had a feeling the castle library would be filled with books containing magic I didn't know. I could have asked Gramps to teach me, but since I could never predict *what* he was going to teach me, I didn't think it would be very efficient.

For example, if I said, "Gramps, teach me some new magic!" he'd say, "Okay! What should I teach you?" And in the end, we'd never make any progress.

As such, I decided to do my own research, and if I found any good spells I'd ask him about them.

After Aina took Jeanne and Aura away, I went to go ask the king if I could use the castle library. Of course, I couldn't just go to the king's room; I first had to find Cruyff and ask him to take me to the king. Cruyff always seemed to materialize out of nowhere, but naturally when I needed him, I could never find him. I was searching the castle when I spotted someone hiding behind a statue. They hadn't noticed me yet, so I quietly snuck up on them, and then...

"AAAAH!" I screamed in an attempt to startle them.

"Eeeeek! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! ...Huh?" After they let out a cry of surprise, for some reason they started apologizing...at which point I realized it was Princess Luna. "Ugh! Don't scare me like that, Tenma! I thought my brother caught me!"

I didn't know what was going on, but it seemed like she was hiding from Tida.

"Sorry... Why are you hiding from your brother, though?" I asked. She gave me an awkward look.

"Um... Promise you won't get mad?"

"That depends on what you're about to tell me. I don't really get mad that easily, but I can't promise anything."

Apparently, Luna took that to mean I wouldn't get mad. She looked around carefully before deciding to tell me.

"Well... I'm supposed to be studying, but I ran away! And my brother was chasing after me!"

She told me that Tida was supposed to be tutoring her today as a way to practice the material himself. "Why do I have to be a part of my brother's studies? It made no sense, so I ran away!"

I wasn't too sure how to react in this situation. I could either go tell Tida or pretend I hadn't seen her. I thought about it for a moment and decided to pretend I hadn't seen her, but then I realized something.

"You're a member of the royal family, right?"

"You already know that, silly!"

I decided to give her a suggestion.

"All right, Luna. I'll tell you about a good hiding place."

“Really?!” She latched on to my suggestion immediately, just like I thought she would.

“Yep. Come to the library with me. I don’t think anyone will find you there. Will I get in trouble for going there without permission, though?”

“Not as long as I’m with you! And if I’m alone and my brother finds me, I’ll get in trouble...” Luna muttered this last sentence, but I still heard her.

“What did you say, Luna?”

“N-Nothing! Let’s hurry up and go!” She grabbed my hand and hurried along. Apparently, she’d decided that dealing with Tida would be my problem, and wasn’t as cautious as before. “Here it is! Hurry, hurry!”

She opened the library door and crouched down, beckoning me inside. But just then...

“Ah, Tenma!” Tida suddenly appeared in front of me.

His voice startled Luna, and she quickly dashed inside the library. She hid behind a nearby bookcase and put a finger over her mouth, silently pleading with me not to say a word about her.

“I’m supposed to be tutoring Luna today, but that little weasel ran off. Have you seen her?”

It seemed he hadn’t spotted her, since he was asking me for information about her whereabouts. I cast a sidelong glance at Luna, making eye contact with her. Then I smirked.

“Tenma? What is it?”

“Oh, sorry. Yeah, I know where Luna is. She’s very nearby, actually.”

“Really? Where is she?” Tida exclaimed as Luna shrunk back.

“She brought me here so I could get permission to use the library, but she ran the other way before you showed up.” I pointed in the opposite direction.

“Thank you!” Tida hurried off to look for her.

“You can come out now, Luna,” I called out as I went into the library. She was hunched down on the floor and looked up at me, puffing out her cheeks.

“Don’t scare me like that!” she yelled, without even looking around to make sure it was safe.

“Be quiet, Luna! This isn’t a place for yelling. If you make too much of a commotion, I’ll go get Tida!” someone suddenly chided, startling both of us.

“Eek!” Luna’s shoulders shook with surprise.

It turned out that the Minister of Finance was also here, buried in a pile of books. “Luna, I’m not going to complain about you running away from your studies. That’s a problem between you and Tida.

However, I won't allow anyone to interrupt me. If that's what you plan to do, I'll call Tida and he'll give you quite a lecture!" he said firmly.

Luna clapped a hand over her mouth and nodded.

"Tenma, you don't need to get permission to use the library. I'll talk to the king about it. However, there are books that are off-limits in the basement, so make sure you don't go downstairs."

Once he was done talking, he continued thumbing through the pages of his book as if we weren't even there, jotting down notes occasionally. I felt awkward sitting next to him, so I chose a seat far away from him and then began looking for books.

As Luna put several children's books on the table, she asked me, "What kind of books are you looking for?"

"Books on magic. Although there are some about medicine too."

At the mention of medicine, the minister perked up, but didn't turn in my direction; instead, he kept flipping through pages.

"Can you make medicine too, Tenma?"

"Yeah. When I lived in Kukuri Village, my mom taught me the basics. I'm now studying the process of making and using new types of medicine." As I spoke, the minister suddenly stood up and came over to us.

"Tenma. Your mother was Miss Celia, correct? And she taught you how to make medicine?"

"Yes, that's right..." His sudden question caught me off guard, so I answered kind of awkwardly, but he paid this no mind.

Abruptly, he bowed his head to me. "Please help me, Tenma!"

Now I was even more confused. I took a deep breath to try to stay calm and decided to hear him out. "Please don't bow your head to me. It's hard to talk like that, but most of all, if we can't talk freely, I won't know what it is I'm supposed to help you with."

According to the minister, his wife had been bedridden for about six months. At first, they'd thought she just had another light bout of the flu, but after a month passed, then another, her symptoms showed no signs of resolving.

Sometimes her symptoms wouldn't be that bad, but she was still unable to stand up on her own, and even sitting up in bed took all of her strength. Recently, she was starting to lose the feeling in her arms and legs. All the castle doctors had seen her and tried various medications, but none had much of an effect.

"But I'm not a doctor. My mom just taught me a little about medicine, that's all." Why was he asking me to help?

"Your mother was very famous for being a skilled herbalist. In fact, Kukuri Village's medicines made from the high-quality herbs there are said to be hidden gems even in the capital, and are highly

valued among the nobility.”

“I didn’t know about all that. Anyway, I’m not sure that I can help you...”

“That’s fine! I’m just saying, perhaps you learned something from Celia that the doctors here in the capital don’t know! Even if it’s unlikely, I want to give it a shot!”

He seemed so desperate. I didn’t know if I could help him or not, but I decided to at least see his wife first.

“Thank you. Please go wait at the entrance and I’ll get ready right away,” he said, before hurrying out of the library.

“I’m sure someone will put the minister’s books back, but what will you do, Luna?” She thought about it for a moment, then started putting her books away.

“I’ll come with you! It’s been a long time since I saw auntie!”

The two of us left the library and, just as we opened the door, ran into Tida.

“There you are! What’s going on, Tenma?” He seemed a little angry. Luna immediately hid behind my back.

“Oh, after I saw you, I found Luna reading in the library. It seemed like she was studying on her own so I let her be. Sorry about that!” I lied, though Tida didn’t seem to buy it. Then I told him that the minister was there too, and he finally believed me. Besides, that part wasn’t a lie.

“Anyway, Tida—we’re going to go see the minister’s wife. Luna wants to come with me.”

“You’re going to see auntie? But she’s ill, and if Luna goes, she’ll just cause trouble. Plus, I still have to tutor her...”

I could feel Luna tensing up, and decided to speak before she had the chance to raise a fuss.

“A change of pace is always a good idea. Plus, Luna was looking forward to going. If the minister doesn’t want her there, he’ll say something. Anyway, I don’t think she’ll be able to focus on studying anymore.”

I pointed to Luna, who was puffing out her cheeks, pouting, and offered this explanation to Tida.

“All right—I’m sure you’re right about that. But I don’t think it’s a good idea to let her off the hook just because she’s in a bad mood...”

“Don’t worry. Just let me handle it. Luna, make sure you study properly next time. And if you do, then I’ll let you play with Shiromaru and Solomon again.”

As Shiromaru and the others hadn’t been getting enough exercise lately, I was thinking of letting them have some playtime soon. Luna adored Solomon, so I thought that would be a very tempting offer.

“Really?! Really, really?! I promise to study!!!”

Surprised by the change in Luna, Tida looked conflicted, but since she seemed motivated, he set a date for their next tutoring session and then left.

“Make sure you keep your promise!” Luna grabbed my hand and led me to the entrance.

The minister hadn’t arrived yet, but there was a carriage waiting there. I didn’t recognize the driver.

A few minutes later, the minister ran over, panting. “Sorry, have you been waiting long?”

“No, we just got here. Luna wants to come along. Is that all right?” I glanced over at her, but she was already trying to climb inside the carriage.

“It’s fine. It’s not a contagious illness, and I’m sure my wife will be happy to see Luna again,” the minister said with a sigh as he saw Luna was already in the carriage. “Go ahead and get in. My house isn’t that far from the capital, but even if we leave now, you might come home a little late.” He urged me inside and then told the driver to go.

As it turned out, the minister’s house was about twenty minutes away from the castle entrance by carriage. We arrived and alighted, and he quickly showed us inside. Several servants there looked surprised to see us, but once the minister took us upstairs they shrugged and went back to their tasks.

“It’s me, Mizaria.” He went into a room on the second floor without knocking. Inside was a woman lying in bed, being waited on by her maid.

The maid bowed once she saw the minister, then excused herself from the room.

“What’s wrong? You seem flustered.”

“I’m sorry for how abrupt this is, but I brought someone here to check out your illness,” he said, beckoning me over. “Remember the boy I told you about from Kukuri Village who saved father? Tenma, this is my wife, Mizaria.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Tenma.”

“Goodness! So you’re the one everyone talks about! It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Mizaria. And I’m glad to see you too, Luna.”

“It’s been a long time, auntie.”

After the introductions were over with, Mizaria turned to her husband. “You were frantic because you wanted to introduce me to Tenma...?”

“That’s part of it, but also, it seems that Tenma learned from his mother, Miss Celia, who was the herbalist for Kukuri Village. I thought perhaps he might know something about your illness.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Go ahead, Tenma.”

We swapped positions, and I stood beside Mizaria.

"I'll do everything I can, but please don't get your hopes up." I took her pulse like my mom showed me, and did a brief examination. Her pulse was about eighty beats per minute, which I thought seemed pretty normal. I called over a female maid who seemed to be around the same age as her and took her pulse too, and it was about seventy beats per minute. As such, I decided she was fine.

I began a physical examination, and that's when I began noticing problems. "Mizaria, can you feel me touching you here?"

"No."

"What about here?"

"No."

I pressed hard on her big toe, but it seemed like her reflexes and nerves were very dulled. Not only that, but her skin seemed tough, and I couldn't feel much magical energy through it.

"I have a feeling that Mizaria is suffering from magic circuit failure."

Mana flowed through the body like blood, and the pathways through which mana flowed were called circuits. When one's circulation of mana was poor or mana could no longer flow through the body, it was called either magic circuit failure, or magic circuit disorder.

However, the illness was quite rare nowadays, and many people didn't know about it. That was because of the development of magical medicine. In the old days, it was common to use medicine and magic in combination for treatment, but nowadays, medicine was only used for simple injuries and illnesses, and magic was used for everything else.

This way of thinking had come about for many reasons. Firstly, treating maladies with magic was less painful, and led to faster healing. Next, the cost relative to the time taken to heal was lower. Also, fewer people registered complaints when patients passed away after receiving magical treatment. Lastly, there were more magic users now than there were in the past, so obtaining such treatments was easier.

It may seem strange that fewer people complained when patients died after magical treatments, but in the case of conventional medical treatments, recovery depends on the doctor's ability. However, with recovery magic, as long as the magic is cast correctly, even weak magic users can heal injuries. (The extent to which the patient is healed, of course, still depends on the skill of the magic user.)

So, even if the patient should pass away, the magic user could claim that they'd used the magic to the best of their abilities, but the treatment had come too late and the magic simply hadn't worked. And

even if there *were* complaints, the magic tended to at least heal injuries on the surface, which made it hard to tell exactly why it had failed.

In the first place, there were no specific qualifications necessary to become a doctor in this world. Anyone could say “I can use Recovery magic, so starting today, I’m a doctor!”

Of course, there were people who properly studied how to become a doctor and gained experience treating patients, but there were no medical schools here like there were in my previous world. Naturally, the doctors in my previous world were better than the ones here.

Therefore, there were very few doctors who were like the internal medicine physicians like in my old world, who could treat maladies with drugs based on knowledge and experience. Furthermore, in the case of a magic circuit disorder, the physician needed to have magical treatment skills as well. Most doctors today would have no idea how to treat these diseases.

“Do you know the cure, Tenma?” asked the minister, grabbing me by the shoulders.

“I know how to treat mild symptoms, but I don’t know how to cure advanced forms of the disease.” I told him what my mother had taught me. “Magic circuit disorder means that some parts of the magical circuits throughout the body are malfunctioning, not allowing magical energy to pass through them. If it wasn’t so severe, I could just use magical energy from the outside to get her circuits flowing again. However, since her symptoms have progressed considerably, this method could damage her magical circuits further. There’s even the risk of doing it wrong and shocking her system, which could result in death.”

Consider the analogy of a hose. In the case of mild symptoms, the hose itself isn’t damaged—it’s more like there’s a little bit of dust clogging the inside, which you can discharge by pushing water through it.

However, in the case of severe symptoms, the hose itself is damaged and very clogged up. Even using the same method, the hose wouldn’t be able to withstand the pressure and might burst. And of course, if it did burst, the resulting explosion of magical power would result in death.

Once I explained that, the mood in the air around me felt heavy, but I continued. “I think Gramps can help. My mother said that Grandpa taught her how to heal.”

“Master Merlin can cure Mizaria?!” The moment he heard this, the minister rushed out of the room in excitement. While I was still dazed by the sudden turn of events, he grabbed me by the hand and raced me down to the carriage.

Luna waved as we left the room, so I guessed she didn't want to come with us right now.

"Minister, if we're going to get Gramps, I think it would be faster if I flew there..." I tried to say this to the minister, who had his arms crossed as he sat in the carriage, but he shook his head.

"I know that would be the quickest way, but I feel that it would be rude. I'm sorry to drag you around like this, but I really want to take the carriage."

I felt like it was a bit late to be apologizing for dragging me around, but he *was* the king's son, after all. Since that was the case, I had no choice but to just go along with it.

After that, the mood in the carriage was anxious and unsettled. The problem lay with the minister, of course. He was completely on edge and wouldn't sit still. Sometimes he'd open his mouth to say something to me, but then would make a face like he wasn't sure what to say before giving up altogether. He did that several times, over and over again.

I considered trying to talk to him, but he had such a serious look on his face and seemed so deep in thought that I wasn't sure what to say either. In the end, I decided to just try to ignore him.

Finally, the carriage arrived in front of Gramps's house. He had two of my golems in his front yard. They seemed a bit cautious when they saw the carriage pull up, but once they recognized my magical energy, they opened the gates for us and allowed the carriage to pass.

The driver looked pretty stunned, but once I told him to keep going and that the golems would leave him alone as long as he stayed quiet, he nervously drove the carriage inside.

"Go ahead, Minister."

"H-Hrm..." He seemed even more nervous now as we walked inside. I was about to show him to the parlor, but Gramps showed up before I could do that.

"You're back early, Tenma. Who's that with you? Oh, it's the minister of finance! What brings you here?"

"There's something we need to talk to you about, Gramps. Can you cure someone who suffers from magic circuit disorder?" I decided to cut straight to the point.

Gramps tipped his head to the side and studied the minister's face, possibly trying to figure out what was going on.

"Come on inside to my room so we can discuss this further."

"Hrm, yes, I more or less understand the situation. I'll get straight to the point—I can't heal her."

Once we got back to Gramps's room, I explained the situation to him, and that was his response. The minister was visibly upset by

Gramps's frank answer.

"But didn't Mom teach you how to treat that illness?"

"Tenma, it's true that I know how to treat it. But just because someone knows how to treat something doesn't mean they *can*. If her symptoms had only been slight, I would've been able to help, but..." Gramps trailed off regretfully.

"I'm grateful just to know what the disease is. I'll try searching for someone who will be able to treat my wife..." The minister rose from his seat and was about to head for the door when Gramps stopped him.

"Ah, please wait! Her symptoms have advanced to the point that it might be too late if you start searching now. I believe we have a better chance of simply healing her."

"Is that true?!" The minister whirled around and raced back over to Gramps.

"It is, but can you back up a little? Tenma's going to learn the treatment."

"Huh? I am?" I blurted out, startled by his sudden announcement.

"That's right. It'll be faster for you to learn it, and she'll have a better chance of surviving." Gramps took two books off the shelf and handed them to me. "Celia wrote these. The first is her notebook—it's filled with entries about her patients. The other is a collection of all of her treatments."

I started with the book about treatments and searched for pages about magic circuit disorders. As the treatments were indexed by symptoms, it didn't take long to find some.

The treatment I already knew about—forcing magical energy into the patient's body—was listed. Then, there was also a treatment for patients who had more severe symptoms.

Treatment for Severe Symptoms:

First, warm the patient's back to loosen the muscles. Next, locate where the magical energy has stagnated and return it to normal with acupuncture. Once this is complete, gradually release your magical energy into the patient. Repeat this process throughout the body until the patient's condition improves. Most patients have been fully cured by the aforementioned treatments.

The minister grabbed me by the shoulders before I could finish reading. "But she can be cured?! Mizaria can be cured?!"

Unfortunately, I hadn't gotten to the essential part.

"W-Wait! There's more. 'However, there were patients who had a

negative reaction to steps two and three. In the end, twelve out of eighteen patients were cured by this method. Six patients experienced no relief at all, and out of those six, one patient died several days later. Their cause of death was determined to be an adverse reaction to treatment.”

It wasn't clear why the treatment worked in some patients and not others, but at any rate, this treatment was not without risks, especially since there had been fatalities.

“But there aren't any other treatments. Mizaria's life is hanging in the balance...” The minister began to worry about what he should do.

“It's true that one option would be to find someone else who knows how to treat the disease successfully. However, I think that you'll have a better chance of saving her life if Tenma tries. Honestly, I think he can definitely do it.”

“Why do you feel that way?” the minister asked.

“Because I don't think there's a more skilled magician in the capital than Tenma.”

“Gramps, you're way better at magic than me. Wouldn't you have a better chance at curing her?”

I thought the minister would probably feel more at ease having Gramps heal her instead. I glanced over at his face and it seemed like my hunch was spot-on.

“I can't do it. I can't manipulate magic as delicately as Celia could, or as you can, Tenma. And I'm getting up there in years... Lately, I've found it hard to do tasks that require precision.”

The minister seemed to accept that answer.

“But most of all, I can give Tenma backup support. And it's not like we're going to do something rash and spring into action right this minute. Tenma and I will sit down and make a plan of action for the safest treatment possible,” Gramps said, before deciding to send the minister home for now.

“W-Well, I'll leave it to you, then.” The minister bowed his head and climbed back into his carriage, but there was still a trace of unease written across his face.

“Come, Tenma. We need to do some tests.”

After that, Gramps and I tried out various methods, and in just three days came up with a treatment we were satisfied with. However, we stayed cooped up in the same room for three days straight, only taking breaks to go to the bathroom and eat. Apparently, the sound of Gramps screaming could occasionally be heard from outside, and when we finally emerged from the room we were surprised to see the king had come to check on us. He was incredibly worried and gave us an angry lecture.

The archduke had written down instructions for Gramps's funeral,

which triggered another one of their fights. By the way, since he had signed the bottom of the letter, I finally learned that the archduke's name was Ernest von Audry. Now that I had learned his name, the archduke instructed me to call him by it, so I did my best to call him Lord Ernest from now on.

"Merlin, is it just me, or has your skin improved? You look more energetic than before too." The archduke—I mean, Lord Ernest—picked up on the changes in Gramps's condition during their quarrel.

The women present—Aura, Aina, and Kriss—immediately perked up when they heard the word "skin."

"Ho ho ho! Are you jealous? These are the results of my experiments with Tenma!" The moment Gramps said that, the women glared at me.

"Master Tenma. You have a young and very willing test subject right here. Please use me as you see fit!"

"A-Aura! Don't try to get the upper hand on me! Master Tenma, please use me as your test subject!"

"Tenmaaaa... Ignore those two annoying girls and use me instead."

As the three of them vied for my attention, the king suddenly stood up.

"Tenma. Would you test it out on me?" He said it so abruptly that I thought it was just another one of his jokes, but was startled when I realized he was dead serious. "My daughter-in-law has been suffering and I've been powerless to help her. I hope this doesn't offend you, but I want you to test the treatment on me so we can be sure it's truly safe. Judging by how Master Merlin looks, it seems to have been a success."

Everyone tried to persuade the king otherwise, but he had made up his mind and wouldn't back down. In the end, Lord Ernest applied some conditions instead.

"I understand that you've made up your mind, but let him test it on me or Cruyff first. Since we're older than you, if it works on us, then it should be safe for you as well. Please, Your Majesty."

"All right then, uncle."

The king relented, and so it was decided that Lord Ernest and Cruyff would test out the treatment first.

Since the treatment's goal was regulating the body's magical circuits, I didn't expect there to be any problems with performing it on a healthy person. Plus, given that Gramps's condition had improved, I thought it would probably be fine.

"All right. We'll do it in this room over here." I led the two of them to a bedroom to do the treatment. By the way, the only people allowed in the room were the two patients, and then Gramps to give me support.

“I’ll go ahead and start. It might sting, but please try to stay still.”
And so, we began!

“You’re very stiff here...”
“Oof!”
“Ooh!”

“And here...”
“Not there!”
“Nngh!”

“...”
“Whee!”
“Ooo!”

Thirty minutes later...

“There was no problem with the treatment at all! That’s right.
However, I’m a bit concerned that it might feel a little...*too* good?”

Their skin was now glowing, and they seemed to look younger as well.

“H-Hrm, there doesn’t seem to be a problem with it, then. I suppose it’s my turn now,” the king said. However, for some reason, he seemed slightly hesitant. I glanced over at the girls and they were all blushing.

“Let’s begin, then.”
“Ooh!”

“Right here!”
“Eeeek!”

“Chest!”
“Nyaah!”

“This spot!”
“Aahhh...”

Thirty minutes later...

“I feel like a whole new world has opened up before me!” the king said, standing up straight and looking refreshed.

“Tenma, what was all that shouting earlier?” Gramps asked.

“I was starting to get tired so I tried to pump myself up, but then I got a little carried away.” Despite all that, the treatments had been a

success—the proof being that all three of my patients looked younger.

At any rate, since the king was satisfied that the treatment was safe, he instructed Cruyff to take us over to the minister's house right away. However, Aina and Jeanne objected.

“Your Majesty, please forgive me, but there is a problem with Master Tenma's treatment!”

“That's right. I think that Lady Mizaria—or any woman for that matter—would object to undergoing it!”

The men looked confused, so Aina answered bluntly. “Just one slipup, and people might suspect that Master Tenma and Lady Mizaria are having an affair! After all... Your Majesty was, er...moaning quite loudly.”

All the men began coughing at once.

“If someone overhears without knowing the situation, they'll think that Lady Mizaria and Tenma are doing something illicit...” Jeanne said, her face bright red.

The men all had awkward looks on their faces now. There was a strange atmosphere in the room, like time had stopped.

“Um... I hate to say this, but under normal circumstances, the patient won't actually react like that...” I blurted out, unable to handle the mood in the air any longer.

“What does that mean, Tenma?”

“Normally, I would rub a numbing medicine on the skin to dull pain and sensation. Otherwise, it can be painful for the patient once their magic starts flowing again. But I didn't use that medicine during these tests so that the effects of the treatment could be more easily seen.”

The king, Lord Ernest, and Cruyff all stared at me with their mouths hanging open in shock.

“In other words, under normal circumstances, the patient won't be that, er...*sensitive*.” I decided to bow my head and apologize for good measure. When I emphasized the word “sensitive,” both Aura and Kriss burst out laughing. Not even Aina could manage to hide her amusement, and I saw the corners of her mouth twitching. Jeanne was even more embarrassed than before, turning a deeper shade of red. It seemed she wasn't in the right state of mind to laugh.

A while later the men regained their composure, and we decided to head to the minister's house for real this time.

At first, Aina wanted Jeanne and Aura to stay behind at Gramps's for special training, but there were still doubts remaining about the treatment because of my prank. As such, the women decided to come along because, as they said, “Who knows what might happen? It'll be safer if there are more women there.”

And so we all traveled to the minister's house, where he was

already waiting for us at the gate. We said our hellos and then went directly to Mizaria's room so I could prepare to treat her.

First, I explained the treatment to the minister and his wife, and when I informed the minister that Mizaria would have to lie on her stomach virtually completely naked, he became flustered to an amusing degree.

Meanwhile, Mizaria just said, "Goodness! That sounds embarrassing" with a smile, which only made the minister's reaction stand out even more.

In the end, Aina ended up doing the initial massage, while the men excused themselves from the room temporarily. I explained to Aina how it should be done, then handed her lotion to use.

While she was giving Mizaria the massage, I took the locks of her hair I had requested in advance, cut them to an appropriate length, sterilized them, and soaked them in medicinal herb extracts.

That was not in my mother's book; it was something I had come up with myself. In order to reduce the burden on the body, even if it was only a little bit, I would use Boost magic on hairs which were thinner than needles, and use those to perform the acupuncture.

I wasn't sure how effective it would be, but if I used her own hair, we at least wouldn't have to worry about allergic reactions.

After about twenty minutes, Aina finished massaging the patient, and then it was my turn. I took a deep breath and examined Mizaria. After some time, I was able to locate a spot on her back that stood out to me. It wasn't discolored in any way, but in my mind's eye it looked black, like a stagnant river.

I grasped a strand of Mizaria's hair which I had seeped in the medicinal liquid and used Boost magic on it. Then I stabbed it into the stagnant spot on her back. She didn't seem to feel pain, and still wasn't moving a muscle. After checking in with her, I continued healing the major spots in her back, lower back, and legs.

An hour passed, and I finally completed the acupuncture. At that point, I decided to wait and see what would happen.

She had about seventy stagnant locations in her body. In comparison, the king, Cruyff, and the archduke had around five to six each, while a patient with mild symptoms would have a few dozen. That went to show just how severe Mizaria's condition had become.

"I'm done for now. After some time has passed, I'll take the needles out. Then, tomorrow we'll gradually start doing physical therapy, which will kick off your recovery."

Apparently, Mizaria had fallen right asleep when I'd stuck the acupuncture needles in her, so she was quiet. Instead, I spoke to the minister. He nodded and said, "I'll stay here until she wakes up." The rest of us went to a room where the king and the others were waiting,

to give them some privacy.

“Are you done already, Tenma?” the king asked immediately as soon as I entered the room. It seemed I’d finished treating her quicker than they’d expected.

“Yes—the treatment itself is pretty simple, but it’s exhausting.” More so mentally than physically, that is. As I explained that to them, the king suddenly went silent, as if something had come to his mind. Afterwards, we told the minister we’d be excusing ourselves and dispersed.

Both the minister and the king thanked me profusely and began discussing the topic of payment, but I told them to please wait until Mizaria had made a full recovery.

“By the way, Tenma—the tournament is coming up soon. Are you ready?” Gramps asked. I told him that I thought starting any kind of special training now would have a negative effect on me, so I decided to preserve my stamina and focus just on strategies until the tournament. My main goal was to reveal Solomon and test out his powers, but if I was going to participate, I might as well win.

As Dean wasn’t going to be participating in the tournament, the person I had to worry about most was the Bandit King. I definitely had a chance of winning. There had been several fellow competitors there when I went to register, but none of them seemed particularly strong besides him.

I couldn’t be certain that there wasn’t anyone stronger than Dean whom I hadn’t seen, but as long as I didn’t let down my guard, I thought I could easily win.

We discussed that for some time, and then the four of us went back to Gramps’s manor.

Part Nine

Meanwhile, at the minister's mansion, the king and the minister were sitting in a room across from each other. They were alone together.

"I'm thrilled that Mizaria's illness might be cured. If her symptoms had progressed further, I was honestly fearing for her life, but thanks to Tenma I think she's out of the woods." Those words might have sounded blunt, but as the minister was used to his father speaking in such a way, he didn't mention it.

"Yes, I'm very relieved as well. Mizaria's still asleep, but her complexion has improved greatly already. I don't think she'll get any worse." The minister's face tightened, and he straightened up in his seat. "Your Majesty, I have a proposition."

"Proceed." The king's tone of voice immediately changed to match the minister's sudden formality.

"I feel as though people nowadays are much too reliant on magic, as evidenced by this incident. However, as we saw tonight, the treatment for magic circuit disorder isn't as difficult as we thought. But for those whose symptoms are severe, like Mizaria, but who don't know about this treatment, it can be life-threatening."

"That's true."

"So I propose that we form a national medical academy."

The king gave the minister a sharp look. "If you propose that at this point, everyone will think that you only suggested it for the sake of your wife."

The minister didn't seem fazed by this. "I don't care. If not for Mizaria, I wouldn't have come up with the idea. Nevertheless, I think it's something this kingdom needs."

"Why?"

"First of all, the lives of our citizens depend on the development and study of medicine. It will strengthen the kingdom to have access to high-level physicians in times of need. I also think it will give us an edge over the other factions."

"Hrm..." Interested, the king leaned forward.

"The school will be established mainly by the royal family. Graduates will work for a few years at a clinic affiliated with the school. They will sign contracts upon admission, and in exchange, part of their tuition will be covered. We'll set the cost of treatment as low as possible so that our citizens can easily access it."

"And?"

"If we center this plan around Prince Tida or Princess Luna, we'll

gather the support of the people. That will help keep the reformists in check. And if they try to oppose the plan, we can spread rumors about them, which will naturally chip away at their power.”

“If the reformists agree, it will increase the royal family’s power, and if they oppose it, they’ll lose power. Interesting! I’ll present this idea at the meeting the day after tomorrow!”

“Wonderful!”

By the way, this plan did come to fruition several years later. The man who had come up with it, Zane von Blumere Krastin, was honored as “the greatest contributor to the development of medicine among the royals,” and was known throughout history as a loving husband who developed medicine for the sake of his beloved wife.

While Alex and the others were trying to solidify the foothold of the royalists, the other factions began to spring into action. The reason for this was that Tenma had grown closer to the royalists, who were in turn clearly accepting him into their sphere. However, Tenma himself had no intention of joining any faction at the moment. Yet, since his parents had ties to the king, everyone figured that he would join the royalists sooner or later.

Some members of the neutral faction were making efforts to form good relationships with Tenma, but their ties with the royalists remained the same as before; they were not enemies, but they were not allies either.

However, there were some who were not pleased at all that Tenma was growing close to the royalists—and they were, of course, the reformists.

At first, they’d thought Tenma was nothing but a child and an adventurer who got along well with the royal family. However, once they saw Tenma training with the royal guard and the knights, they began to panic. Furthermore, some heard the recent rumors that Tenma was the legendary Dragonslayer, and also a Dragon Tamer who would go down in history. This made them worry about how influential he would become.

At this rate, the reformists, who had gained enough power to compete with the royalists, would be crushed by this child with a promising future—Tenma. The best-case scenario would have been to win him over to their side, but based on his closeness to the royal family, this would have been nearly impossible. The next best case would have been to prevent Tenma from becoming a royalist, but that was also difficult to achieve.

In that case, the prevailing theory was that they must eliminate Tenma—but it would be tough going up against a Dragonslayer. Worst-case scenario, it could destroy them too.

It was hard to believe that Tenma could wipe out their faction

single-handedly, but if he teamed up with the royalists or some neutrals who weren't fond of the reformists, it would certainly be possible. And if the general public caught wind of Tenma's history, he would surely gain their favor. If he was just a Dragonslayer or Dragon Tamer, that would have been one thing, but with both titles, he was unstoppable.

Not only that, but he'd gained the title of Dragonslayer when he was only ten years old, saving his friends and family who had been abandoned by the nobles. He'd challenged an ancient dragon, whose name was recorded in the history books, in order to avenge his parents who were killed, single-handedly defeated it, and ended up saving the kingdom. To put it bluntly, he'd even shown mercy by forgiving the king who was indirectly responsible for the tragedy in Kukuri Village. Not only that, but he'd gained a mid-class dragon as a follower, a feat which was previously thought to be impossible.

It was a story so well-made it almost sounded like a fairy tale or a heroic epic. And after having heard this story, no one would try to oppose Tenma.

However, the reformists were filled with people who had vested interests, and among them were many who were idiots in the truest sense of the word. In a way, it was a faction of those who openly opposed their king, to whom they had to pledge allegiance. Obviously, there had to be some idiots among them.

It was only natural that these idiots would eventually cause a commotion, but no one could have predicted just how big a commotion it would be...



Today was the eve of the festival, but as some people were impatient, there were already food stalls everywhere, which made the festival feel like it was already here.

In the midst of this, we were headed to the venue for the Victory Prayer Imperial Martial Arts Festival, more commonly known as the martial arts tournament, which would also start tomorrow.

"Tenma, let's go over there!"

"Tenma, I wanna eat that!"

"Tenma, I'm thirsty!"

I had reunited with my old friends, the catgirl triplets, who were currently dragging me around town. Since they kept leading me on detours, we weren't anywhere close to the venue yet.

Behind us was Primera, who had a wry smile on her face; Jeanne and Aura, who didn't look pleased at all; and Aina and Kriss, who just looked amused by the whole thing.

"Why is this happening...?"

It all started this morning, when I was getting ready to go look at the venue by myself.

“Tenma, you’ve got some visitors,” Gramps came to my room and announced, just as I was about ready to leave.

“Visitors? Who is it?”

There weren’t many people who would come visit me in the capital, and most of them were members of the royal family who just barged in without even asking first. I’d had to order the golems guarding the house to let them in when they recognized them.

I figured that meant I didn’t know my visitors. Maybe it was an annoying noble who had come to bribe me. However, none of them had gone to the effort of coming all the way to Gramps’s manor before—and he wouldn’t have allowed that anyway.

“Just come downstairs. They’re in the parlor.” Gramps had a smirk on his face as he led me downstairs.

I pushed open the parlor door and froze when I saw who was waiting for me.

“Tenma! Yaaaay! It’s Tenmaaa!”

Lily, Nelly, and Milly cried in unison.

“Long time no see, Tenma.” And Primera, who was wearing her armor.

“It has been a long time since I saw the four of you last... But what are you doing here?”

Primera had a sheepish grin on her face as she answered. “Well, we’re going to enter the tournament. The commander of the knights said I should do some studying in the capital while I was here, so I brought the entire fourth unit along with me...”

Apparently, a request from the capital had arrived at Duke Sanga’s. Basically, it said they were short-handed and asked for backup. Obviously, he couldn’t say no to a request—essentially an order—from the capital, and similar requests had gone out to other nobles (mainly from the royalist faction). Although they couldn’t pay much, they would give a small salary and time off to any knight who volunteered. Basically, it was a good part-time job for them.

“And since our unit has a lot of nobles, we were invited.”

“All right—but what about the triplets?”

I peeled the three sisters off of me and made them sit down.

“A few days before Primera left town, we just happened to run into her in front of the Full Belly Inn. She told us that you were in the capital, so we decided to come with her!” Lily spoke for the group. Apparently, Primera had learned of my whereabouts from her father the duke, and she had in turn told the triplets.

“We thought we might as well participate in the tournament, and came to invite you to join us!” Lily continued. They had arrived in the capital late last night, just barely making the registration deadline for the tournament.

It seemed that in order to make things fair, there was no need to write the names of your team members down in advance. It was sufficient to write their names down before the first match of the team competition.

By the way, I asked Lily who was on her team, and she told me it would be the Wildcat Princesses, Tenma/Shiromaru/Rocket, and Primera.

“Hang on a second! Why is Primera a member too?!”

According to Primera, the entire fourth unit of knights had come to the capital by request of the king. Wouldn’t that have made her ineligible to fight? I asked her that question and she averted her eyes and mumbled, “I got permission from the Minister of Military Affairs...”

I was confused by how she’d brought him up all of a sudden, but at the same time, I had the feeling Lyle had just gotten carried away.

“Yeah. This bossy guy came to welcome the knights and so we said, ‘Can Primera be on our team?’ And he was like, ‘Oh, sure! Go ahead!’”

“Since he came to greet them, we thought he was a noble like Primera, but we were super shocked to learn he’s actually a member of the royal family!”

“Yeah, he totally didn’t seem like it!”

The minister was way too easygoing. Under normal circumstances, Lily and the others would have been punished for asking such a thing.

Just then, Primera piped up. “Anyway, for some reason he knew that I was friends with you, and he already knew about the triplets too. I guess he came to meet us because of that.”

Yep. He definitely had something up his sleeve. *I’m gonna tattle on him to Queen Maria later. For sure.*

“By the way, Tenma...”

“Who’s that?”

“Those maids over there...”

I followed the triplets’ gazes and saw Jeanne and Aura peeking in through the gap in the doorway.

“Master Tenma... Are you cheating on Jeanne and me?” Aura whispered, glaring at me. Her voice was so quiet that under normal circumstances no one else would have heard her, but unfortunately for me, the triplets had incredibly sharp hearing and heard every word.

“Tenma! What is she talking about, cheating on them?!”

“Who are those two women?!”

“Are they your girlfriends?!”

All three of them began interrogating me, and suddenly Aura shoved Jeanne in front of her.

“That’s enough! You...you cat-burglar man-thieves! Jeanne here is Master Tenma’s bride! And I’m his concubine! Well, I mean, concubine-to-be...” Aura added in a mutter.

But the triplets and Primera were so stunned by the first part of Aura’s announcement that they didn’t even hear the last part.

“Tenma, you’ve got to be kidding!”

“You’re not really getting married, are you?! Hey!”

“There’s no way *she’s* your concubine, right?!”

When the three of them came back to their senses, they started shaking me violently and interrogating me. I tried to respond, but Aura let out a high-pitched laugh before I had the chance.

“Ohhhh HO HO HO HO! How pathetic of you! As you can see, Master Tenma already has *us* by his side! Now that you’ve witnessed this for yourselves, go ahead and scat! You little cat-burglar triplets! Shoo!” Aura suddenly seemed to have transformed into some kind of evil villainess, but then a moment later she abruptly pitched forward.

“You hold your tongue, you worthless maid!” Aina had shown up and knocked Aura into next week from behind. “I’m so terribly sorry. I’m ashamed to say that I’m this idiot’s sister, Aina.” As she came closer, Aina apologized to the triplets. She was holding a plate with sweets on it, and behind her was a golem pushing a cart with a tea set on it.

“Argh!” That was the sound of Aina stepping on Aura, who was collapsed upon the ground, as she set the sweets on the table. Then, forgetting that Aura was still on the floor, Aina stepped on her again when she went to retrieve the tea set.

“Arghh... You’ve gotten fatter, Sis... Ooof!” Aura really shouldn’t have said that, because this time Aina stepped on her head. Aina immediately glanced over at me afterwards, but I acted like I hadn’t heard a thing.

“Which means Tenma’s single? I’ll marry him, then!”

“Me too!”

“Me three!”

Now that Aura had been silenced, the triplets started making a commotion. Fortunately, this didn’t last very long.

“That’s enough! Master Tenma’s fiancée must be given their blessing by a certain person first!” Aina suddenly returned, making sure to step on Aura’s head once again.

“That’s the first I’m hearing of this, Aina. Who has to give their permission for that?” I had absolutely no intention of getting married, but the thought of someone having carte blanche over who I married

suddenly made me angry. “I’m sure it’s not Gramps. Oh—is it the king? Looks like I’m going to have to talk to him...”

He was the first person that came to mind. In fact, I couldn’t see it being anyone else.

“Master Tenma, if this was the king’s decision, I don’t think the queen would have remained silent about it. However, the person I am talking about is in fact Queen Maria herself. To be more specific, she is standing in for Lady Celia.”

“What are you talking about?” Surprised to hear my mother’s name, I took a seat.

Aina waited until I was settled, then trampled over Aura again on her way over to me. “Basically, Lady Celia left behind a letter addressed to Queen Maria which said ‘Please take care of Tenma for me.’”

“Huh?” I wasn’t following.

Aina bowed her head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t give you any further details. However, as the letter was written before the incident, the queen is treating what it says as Lady Celia’s last wish...and intends to follow it to the letter.” Aina concluded by repeating that this was all she could say. I still didn’t buy the whole story, but since she wouldn’t say anything else, we came to a dead end and an awkward silence filled the room.

A few minutes passed with Aina and I staring each other down, and then I heard a voice coming from down by her feet.

“You’re heavy, Sis! You’ve gained weight! Should’ve gotten married when you had the chan— Oof!”

Aura seemed to have come back to life, but once again put her foot in her mouth, and so was (forcefully) put back to sleep.

However, thanks to that exchange, the mood in the air lightened, so Aura’s timing was, for once, actually good. Which was a rare thing.

“All right. I’ll ask the queen directly next time I see her. Will you tell her I want to see her to talk to her about it? It won’t be right away because of the tournament, though.”

“All right. I’ll tell her.”

I put an end to the conversation before the weird mood could return, calming everyone down by saying I’d talk to her directly.

By the time Aina and I finished talking, I noticed for the first time that Gramps and Kriss were in the room. “Oh, I didn’t even notice you two were here.”

“Hey!”

“That’s not nice!”

I was probably a bit too blunt and seemed to have hurt their feelings.

Putting that aside, I decided to head to the place where the

tournament would be held to check it out beforehand. The triplets said they would come with me, of course, and Primera was also free, so she joined us as well. As Jeanne was ablaze with competitive spirit and Aura had made a recovery, they said they would tag along. Then, because Kriss seemed amused by the whole thing, and Aina said she needed to keep an eye on Aura, they were coming too. As for Gramps, he didn't seem to know what to do with himself. I thought it would be a bit dangerous for the sage to travel in a group with that many women, and asked him to stay home.

Gramps looked a little disappointed as he watched us leave. The triplets were so carried away by the excitement of the capital that they ended up leading the way.

"Settle down, you three. We're just going to check out the arena."

If they didn't knock it off, there was no way we would get there before sundown. I had to keep the three of them in line for us to make progress. Unfortunately, the streets in the capital were packed, so it was nearly impossible to walk.

"Might as well take a carriage..."

Carriages were a matter of convenience because the capital was so large, and there were many more than usual around because of the upcoming festival. There were special roads designated solely for carriages, and depending on where you were, they could be rather handy.

"Let's go catch a carriage," I decided. "They shouldn't be that crowded today."

There were many carriages to choose from as well. To put it in terms of my previous world, they were basically like buses or taxis, with stops where you could get on and off.

We arrived at the nearest stop just as the last carriage had departed, so we were the first in line. However, as there was a maximum capacity of twelve to a carriage, we realized we might have to split up into two carriages. We agreed to meet up at the next stop in case that happened.

Luckily, a lot of people got off when the next carriage arrived ten minutes later, so we were able to all get on the same one. It arrived at the station near the plaza in about thirty minutes. We alighted and were able to see the venue right away.

"There are a lot of people here who had the same idea I did..." I murmured to myself.

Several others were clearly participants and had come to scope out the venue as well.

Since only staff members were allowed inside, most of those who had come were figuring out the route to the venue, but some were trying to recruit members for their team or intimidate others.

“There are people already lined up at the entrance!” It seemed those kinds of people existed in every world—those who leapt at the chance to get there ridiculously early and get the best seats possible, that is. I reflected on the nostalgic scene as I walked around the outside of the venue. Suddenly, I felt several sets of eyes on me.

I turned around and spotted several dozen men standing there. Since I’d abruptly stopped and turned around, the rest of my party followed suit.

“Tch!” The moment Aina turned around, she clicked her tongue, clearly displeased, which was rather unusual for her. Jeanne and Aura immediately hid behind my back.

One of the men dramatically took a step forward. “What a coincidence to see you here, Aina! And Jeanne and Aura too. I’ve been worried about you.”

“Yes, it certainly is a coincidence, Baronet Chloride. We have important matters to attend to, so if you’ll excuse us... Have a nice day,” Aina said curtly.

Apparently, this was the infamous Baronet Podro il Chloride. But Aina turned her nose up at him as if to say he wasn’t even worth her time, before whirling around.

Chloride’s groupies began to raise a fuss about Aina’s attitude. “You’re being rude to the baronet!” One of them reached out to grab her by the shoulder, but...

“Get your filthy hands off of me!” Aina grabbed his hand first and whipped him into a shoulder throw. His face slammed into the ground and he was knocked unconscious. Following this, Aina removed her gloves and smacked him upside the head with them.

Then she put a new pair of gloves on as if it were nothing at all, glared at Chloride like he was little more than a pile of trash, and walked back over to me. “Let’s hurry, Master Tenma. Tomorrow will be very busy, and we don’t want to waste our valuable time.”

Chloride seemed to understand her meaning, because his face went bright red and he suddenly dropped the cocky attitude. “Just who do you think you are, you little brat?! Do you know who *I* am? I’m a noble! I’m a *baronet*!” He began screaming in a rage, not caring who was around to watch, but Aina wasn’t bothered in the slightest.

“I wasn’t being rude at all. I was just saying I haven’t the time to deal with scoundrels who would grab the shoulder of a lady. Is this the kind of company you usually keep, Baronet?”

Several onlookers began to laugh. Chloride turned an even deeper shade of red and glared at the people who were laughing, silencing them. They fell quiet because a noble was glaring at them, which seemed to improve his mood slightly. “Whatever...” he said, before pointing at me. “Anyways, who is that little brat?”

“What did you say?” Honestly, the last thing I wanted to do right now was deal with this guy, and I’d been sincerely hoping I could just ignore him, but once he called me out I no longer had a choice. I figured he was just going to spout off a bunch of nonsense, anyway.

“I’m Jeanne’s blood relative, so you’re gonna hand her over to me!”

This was just what I expected him to say, and I quickly turned him down. “I refuse.” That must have surprised him, as he immediately tensed up. “Let’s go, everyone.”

The moment we turned, Chloride came back to himself and screamed, “Stop right there, you little brat! I’m a *noble*! You don’t have the right to refuse a noble!”

Sighing, I decided I might as well just deal with him. “You abandoned Jeanne’s family. You have no right to call yourself her relative. Not only that, but there are rumors that you actively tried to destroy her family. Most importantly, the king himself has recognized that I have the right to own Jeanne. It doesn’t matter if you’re a noble. I have absolutely no reason to hand over my slave to you,” I said angrily.

Chloride began to sweat. “Th-The king? You’re bluffing!”

“If you think I’m lying, why don’t you ask Archduke Ernest, Prince Tida, or Princess Luna?”

Once before, the archduke had asked me to give Jeanne to him. That was most likely because he recognized me as her rightful owner, but nothing was said about her being an erstwhile noble-turned-slave. Nobles becoming slaves didn’t happen often in this world, but it wasn’t unheard of either. Of course, it would have been a different story if it was a member of the royal family or someone above the status of a duke, but Jeanne was the daughter of a mere viscount. If nobles began extending a helping hand to every person of that rank, there’d be no end to it. Not only that, but slaves who used to be nobles were very useful due to having various abilities. It was fairly common for them to be quite valuable.

That was why those who bought such slaves rarely parted with them, and even if they did, they’d ask a high price. As such, getting a hold of slaves like that was rather difficult.

“Now, if you understand the situation, we’ll be on our way.” When I turned my back on the baronet this time, I was intent on walking away for real, but unfortunately, he still hadn’t given up.

“Don’t think I’m just some mere baronet! I’m the right-hand man of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Duke Durham!” Chloride boasted.

My reaction to this was basically: “*Yeah? Who cares? Thanks for telling me who’s behind all this.*” But Chloride misinterpreted my exasperated silence for fear and puffed out his chest with a triumphant

look on his face.

Aina looked like she was about to give him a piece of her mind, but I held up a hand. Then someone else piped up instead. "Oh? You mean the Minister of Internal Affairs is trying to extort public property belonging to his citizens?"

Shocked, Chloride shouted angrily in the direction of the voice. "What did you just say?!"

"Didn't you hear me? You're trying to say that the minister would support the unlawful seizure of a slave who has been recognized as this man's property by the king?" The person spoke loudly enough that my party and everyone else around us could hear. They put special emphasis on the words "minister" and "unlawful seizure," and it sounded more like they were directing the question to the people around us than to Chloride himself.

At first, Chloride's face turned red with anger, but once he saw who the person speaking was, and when the crowd began asking him the same question, all the color drained from his face. Not only had the person in question completely deflated the baronet's self-confidence, but he'd delivered such a blow that there was no longer a leg for the baronet to stand on.

As for this mystery man, he looked quite pleased with himself to have arrived on the scene with such impeccable timing. He triumphantly averted his gaze from the baronet and came towards me.

"Long time no see, Marquis Sammons," I said, loud enough for the crowd to hear. A buzz went through them at once.

"I thought it was you, Master Tenma! I came over here and, lo and behold, a rather nasty man was harassing you! You must have a knack for attracting trouble with nobles, hm?" Upon his addressing me, the marquis's tone of voice immediately became casual.

The crowd began to whisper, "Is this boy the son of some great noble?" and other such things. Not missing the opportunity, the marquis turned towards the baronet to deliver another blow.

"So? What's the answer to my question? If you insist that the Minister of Internal Affairs would support the unlawful seizure of Master Tenma's property, property which was recognized by the king, then I think we have a very big problem on our hands! In fact, I think it would be wise for me to notify His Majesty so he can admonish Duke Durham!" Marquis Sammons said, gesturing dramatically as he spoke.

Chloride turned even paler and wobbled to the side; his lackeys had to catch him to stop him from falling to the ground. "I-I was mistaken... I'm solely responsible... The duke has nothing to do...with this..." he uttered regretfully.

The look on Marquis Sammons's face was even sterner now.

“Which means you deceitfully used the name of Duke Durham in order to attempt to steal property from an adventurer?! By my name, the name of Marquis Sammons, it is my duty to formally report this to His Majesty the King! You would be wise to conduct yourself carefully until this matter is resolved! If you attempt to leave the capital before that, then prepare to be charged with treason!” he declared loudly.

The word “treason” seemed to surprise Chloride and his expression changed to one of anger, but he did not object and instead unsteadily walked away, supported by his men.

“It’s good to see you again, Marquis Sammons. And thank you,” I said, as soon as Chloride disappeared from sight.

“No, no—it’s I who can’t thank you enough. I’d like to thank you for keeping the reformists in check, actually,” the marquis said, waving a hand in front of his face.

“Oh? Then it seems you must have been hiding nearby, waiting for the perfect time to make your appearance.”

Seeming a little embarrassed, the marquis turned slightly away from me. “Oh, you noticed? I’m sorry. It really was miraculously good timing—I couldn’t miss the chance.” As he made excuses, he sounded a little impatient that we were having this discussion at all, but I really didn’t mind. In fact, I thought if I were in his shoes, I’d probably have done the same thing. Yeah, I definitely would’ve.

“I don’t mind in the least. What you did was only natural for a royalist. Thanks to you, I doubt anyone from the reformists will try to meddle with Jeanne anymore.”

At any rate, because of the marquis, I had one less thing to worry about. Hopefully, Chloride’s credibility among the reformists had just been destroyed, though I wasn’t positive about that. In the best-case scenario, he could lose his power as a noble entirely. He really reminded me of Regir, though—a sorry excuse for a man.

As the old saying goes, even a cornered rat will bite a cat, and if such a pathetic man was about to lose everything, who knew what he was capable of? Regardless, I had a feeling he was about to stir up a lot of trouble. He was such a small fry that I’d barely even noticed him coming close to me, and then he’d harassed me. This sort of thing *did* seem to happen to me a lot.

Chloride seemed a bit smarter (and more evil) than Regir, so I’d have to be careful and warn everyone about it later. It seemed like the marquis was having similar thoughts because he kept muttering things like “It’s his fault for being such a sorry excuse for a noble.”

“At any rate, I shall report this to the king. By the way, Master Tenma—you’re participating in the tournament tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“Yes, both as an individual and in the team event. Why do you

ask?"

His shoulders drooped to hear this. "You're competing in the team event too? Oh, it's just that the knights from my house and Gulliver are competing as well. I only hope they won't have to go up against you..."

It certainly wouldn't look good for the marquis's knights to lose early in the tournament. I asked him why he decided to have them compete and was surprised by his answer. "Well, because I wanted to show off Gulliver, of course! And prove that he's not like all the other ogres! He's more than just brawn!"

Ah—in other words, he wasn't participating for the sake of his house's pride, but because he was an overbearing parent who wanted to brag about his follower. I had the feeling, though, that this was probably the case for most tamers who were participating. They all wanted to show off their followers to some extent. In fact, if someone had asked me if it was the same for me, I wouldn't have been able to say no.

"Well, Gulliver is quite smart. Everyone will be surprised to see it—I know I was."

Ogres were one of the three types of monsters that I considered the most hotheaded, the other two being goblins and orcs. I think all adventurers would have agreed that none of these species were very smart at all, although there were exceptions like Gulliver.

"But I'm sorry to say, Marquis... The talk of this tournament will definitely be Solomon." Even though Gulliver was a rare and very intelligent ogre, he was no match for a dragon like Solomon.

"Argh... Well, I can't argue with that. I only hope that Gulliver gets to compete before your team does!" He uttered a prayer towards the sky.

"Speaking of which, Marquis... Recently I read a book written by you which I found in the royal castle's library, and I learned the technique Summon."

"What?! Is that right?! It was meant to be an introductory book on summoning magic, but my sons just couldn't get the hang of it. I tutored my eldest son on it personally and he somehow managed to learn it, but you're the first I've heard of someone who learned it just from reading the book alone!"

The way the marquis spoke of his book made it seem like a failure, but that's not what I thought of it. To me, it was a pretty easy-to-understand introduction to the spell. The problem was that most people didn't have an aptitude for summoning magic. When I told him that, his eyes widened, and he replied that that had never occurred to him before. There weren't many users of summoning magic at all. Currently, there weren't even ten in the entire kingdom, and I was the

only one out of that ten who didn't have Sammons blood flowing in my veins. Apparently, there had only ever been a grand total of five people who could use summoning magic but weren't related to the Sammons family.

The magic was said to have been invented by his ancestors, and additionally, the book said that the Sammons family was granted a noble rank in recognition of their achievements. There were two types of summoning magic. One was just called Summon. It was a spell that summoned objects that had your original seal applied to them, but unlike in games and novels, you couldn't summon beasts (with the exception of inanimate creatures like golems).

The second was a spell called Apport, which was a remote teleportation spell. You could send things to a specific location, or recall marked objects.

The two spells had many things in common. The difference was that Summon was used to recall objects to a place you recognized, but Apport could summon items somewhere within arm's length.

Although Summon may have seemed inferior to Apport, it didn't apply a limit to the size of the objects that could be summoned, apart from one's own magical energy. Apport, on the other hand, did have a size limit, which was about the size of the individual using the magic.

"If only I had a daughter, I could marry her off to you..."

"Even if you did, I would be quite reluctant to become Gary's brother-in-law..." And "reluctant" was putting it mildly—I'd have been vehemently opposed to it. The marquis smiled wryly but didn't object.

"Well, if you'll excuse me. Thanks again for your help."

"Not at all, and thank you! You know, I just thought of something. Perhaps if I just followed you around, I'd be able to catch all sorts of idiot nobles," he joked. Honestly, though, given my experiences, he wasn't that far off the mark.

We parted ways with the marquis and decided to take a walk around the area, as the arena itself was off-limits to prevent crime and fraud. We made our way around the food stalls, sampling the wares and joking around with each other. Just then, I saw we were near the shop I wanted to go to most.

"Excuse me—but I'm going to go say hello."

I'd intended to go by myself, but the others wouldn't hear of it and decided to follow me. This particular shop was one of my favorites in the capital. It not only preserved old traditions but also followed the latest trends.

"Hello," I said as I passed through the door. "I was nearby, so I decided to come and say hello."

"Oh, it's Tenma! Welcome!"

As Aina and Kriss knew about the shop, they weren't surprised,

but Jeanne, Aura, the triplets, and Primera hadn't heard of it. They were quite surprised when they looked around the interior—not just at the things that the shop sold, but also at the person who was minding it.

“What's the matter? Do you think it's unusual for a woman like me to make things like this?” said the woman, lifting a large shield that was probably at least thirty kilograms. It was big enough to hide Jeanne completely, but the woman hefted it with no effort at all, humming as she made various adjustments to it.

The woman was actually a dwarf, but a bit taller than normal—a little over 160 centimeters—so at first glance, she looked like a normal human woman. However, even if she were a male dwarf, it wouldn't have been easy to lift a thirty-kilogram shield with one hand. I couldn't blame Jeanne and the others for being surprised.

“That should be good for now. Hey! Put this away! The customer will pick it up tomorrow morning!” she called out to the back of the room. Two more female dwarves emerged and collected the shield.

“So, Tenma. What are you doing here with this many female attendants? And even Aina and Kriss are here! Are you so hard up for men that you had to turn to someone this young?” Wiping her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand, the woman immediately began teasing Aina and Kriss. It seemed like they were rather close.

I introduced Jeanne and the others, and the dwarven woman introduced herself in turn. “It's nice to meet you. I'm Kelly. I know it may not be obvious, but I'm a pure-blooded dwarf!” Once she was done, she beckoned me over. “You came at just the right time, Tenma. I just finished the item you requested.” She showed me to the workshop which was at the rear of the building. The girls went ahead and followed me, and as Kelly didn't seem to mind, I didn't say anything. “See? Here it is! I made it pretty quickly, but I promise I didn't cut any corners!”

It was a double sword. Well, I say “sword,” but it was much too big to be a sword, and it didn't have the hilt that a normal sword would have. Instead, there was a round sphere attached where the hilt would be.

“This is the greatest sword I've ever seen. To be honest, no sane person would order a sword like this, or make one. That's how out of this world it is,” Kelly said proudly.

The sword was two meters long, fifty centimeters wide, and fifteen centimeters thick. The width from the base to the tip of the sword was almost the same, and the tip wasn't sharp. It was made to draw an arc. The reason the width from base to tip was the same, and the tip slightly thicker, was so that I could use centrifugal force to my advantage.

Well, not exactly to *my* advantage. The sword wasn't for me, of course. It was for my secret weapon—Guardian Giganto—to wield.

I'd yet to find the chance to use him in Sagan's dungeon. I'd been thinking about equipping him with some kind of weapon, but the size of it was a problem. I wouldn't be able to make a big enough weapon myself. Besides, he would be more powerful fighting with his bare hands, rather than wielding a weapon that wasn't sufficient for him. But I didn't want to run the risk of shattering his hands by getting him to attack unarmed. That was why I thought a weapon was necessary.

Ever since I arrived at the capital, I'd been visiting various weapons shops and blacksmiths whenever I had the time, looking for a craftsman who might be able to make a weapon for Giganto, but no one was interested. Most of them wouldn't even listen to my story.

Just when I'd been about to give up hope and figure out something myself, I happened to find out about Kelly and consulted with her.

She'd said, "*I can* make such a thing, but I have no intention of making a weapon you can't use yourself!"

As such, I decided to show her Giganto so she could see who would be using the item I requested, and then she finally agreed. Ever since then, I'd been coming around occasionally to check on her progress. I'd ordered a total of four items from Kelly—two were Giganto swords, and the rest were weapons that resembled halberds with shortened handles, like large spears.

A normal large spear had a tip about twice as large as a normal spear, but the one I'd ordered this time had a tip about 150 centimeters long, with a handle that was 100 centimeters. Its proportions were rather distorted for a large spear. I guess you could have said it was actually a sword that resembled a large spear.

In this world, and unlike in my previous world, thanks to the existence of magic, it wasn't uncommon for people to wield weapons that were balanced in such a way. Even if their balance made them difficult to use, you could use magic tools or boost your physical abilities, or even cast magic on the weapons themselves, to make them easier to handle. Because of this, there were quite a lot of unusual weapons out there.

Kelly didn't have any doubts about my order. In fact, she was very enthusiastic and seemed to enjoy the process of creating it. This was because the materials I wanted her to use were quite special.

"I never thought I'd make a weapon using solanite, mythril, and orichalcum all at once."

That's right—I'd chosen the three hardest and rarest materials in the fantasy world, according to my research, for the weapons I'd ordered this time (excluding Giganto's sword). As for Giganto's sword,

I just used magic iron for that, as I didn't have enough special materials for it.

For the mythrill, I used what I had as well as what Kelly had available for commercial use. The solanite and orichalcum were given to me by the royal family. That was what I had chosen for my reward for saving the Minister of Finance's wife and saving Tida and Luna. Also, it was my compensation for helping the king so long ago.

By the way, solanite was a reddish-gold metal that was slightly inferior to orichalcum in terms of hardness, but superior in magical power. It was a rare metal that was superior to mythrill in both aspects. The reason I'd even used mythrill at all was that I didn't have enough solanite and orichalcum alone to make the weapons, so it was needed to fill the gaps. But when I first met with Kelly and said, "Add mythrill to make up for any missing material," she'd spat out her mouthful of alcohol like some kind of poisonous mist.

The weapons were thirty percent mythrill, forty percent solanite, and thirty percent orichalcum. However, since it was impossible to make an alloy by simply combining all three types of metals, Kelly had to first use orichalcum as the core of the weapon, before using an alloy of mythrill and solanite to fill the gaps.

"Because of the materials I'll be using, I won't have the last two done in time for the tournament. I'm sorry about that," she apologized, bowing her head. But as I had no intention of using those weapons during the tournament, I told her it was fine, and to take her time with the weapons and craft them to her satisfaction.

"By the way, Tenma... Are you really going to use that big sword in the team battle?" Primera asked hesitantly. Her face was pale, and I guessed she was picturing what one blow from that sword would do to an opponent.

"No, I can't use that. I don't even plan to use Giganto at all during the tournament. My goal is to just use the boost from Giganto as my trump card."

As I still wasn't fully capable of controlling Giganto yet, it was hard to predict what might happen if I used it in a tournament. I could even end up accidentally killing my opponent. Since this was a tournament, that wasn't technically a crime, but if I killed them with a lethal weapon that I'd lost control of, I could still be charged with a crime, even if it was an accident. And in the first place, I didn't even know if Giganto would be allowed in the tournament.

If it was allowed, I could use Giganto in one-on-one battles. However, I thought his main strength lay in group battles, particularly those that took place at close quarters. Taking all of that into account, I didn't think a team battle would show off even half of his true capabilities. Still, against an average opponent, even having him fight

at half strength would probably be overkill.

“Oh, I forgot! Tenma, let’s form a team!” Lily said. Unfortunately, as I’d already registered as my team’s leader and decided upon the members, I couldn’t join Lily’s team. She and the others were quite disappointed when I told her that.

“In that case, what will we do about our last member?” Primera asked. Lily and the others groaned. Because they had been counting on me to join, there was now a vacancy on their team. They understood that they wouldn’t necessarily be strong enough to win without a full team, so they had to give this some serious thought.

“I’ll join, as long as you don’t mind one condition,” Kriss said. “When a knight participates in a tournament, they’re usually exempt from work, but there’s always a chance an emergency might come up and I won’t be able to participate. If that’s still all right with you, I’d like to join.”

Primera seemed even more pleased than Lily and the others did. “It would be very reassuring if you could join us, Kriss!”

She seemed so surprised and thrilled about it that I couldn’t help but ask why. She told me that Kriss was very famous among female knights, and many of them looked up to her. “She was promoted to the royal guard very quickly after being knighted—and not only that, but she was chosen to be one of His Majesty’s bodyguards! Every female knight admires her and wants to be like her!”

Kriss gave me a smug look at Primera’s praise.

“However, she’s not popular with men at all,” Aina piped up.

“What?! I could say the same thing about you!”

“Nobles approach me all the time.”

“Well, any noble who approaches *you* can’t possibly be worthwhile!”

“Better that than being completely ignored by men.”

The argument between them began to heat up. Personally, I thought they were on equal footing, but, not wanting to get involved, I kept those thoughts to myself.

Unfortunately, there was someone present who just didn’t know how to read the room.

“Isn’t it just as bad to be unpopular with men as it is to only have weirdos hitting on you?” Aura muttered. And of course, both of the women in question chose this moment to suddenly have exceptional hearing, so they didn’t miss a word of what Aura said.

“And what exactly do you mean by that, Aura?”

“Let’s have a chat outside.”

“H-Huh? Wait a minute!”

Forgetting their argument with each other, Kriss and Aina closed in on Aura in perfect harmony. They each grabbed one of her arms

and dragged her outside.

“Aina, Kriss!” I called after them.

“Master Tenma, heeeelp!”

“We’ll be right back! Take your time!”

The two of them proceeded outside, ignoring me. I heard Aura’s repeated cries for help, but ultimately decided to pretend I didn’t.

“Well, shall we go home? I’ll be back, Kelly.”

“See ya then, Tenma! Hopefully I can finish your remaining items before the tournament’s over.”

I said goodbye to Kelly, and we decided to return to Gramps’s manor. On the way home, we walked through the market in the square and saw a shop that seemed strangely busy.

“I think that’s a fishmonger. But why are there so many people...?”

Suddenly, there was a loud metallic sound from within the crowd. Each time it rang out, there were cheers and shrieks.

“Excuse me, but what’s going on? Is there some kind of event?” I asked a man nearby. He answered me excitedly.

“The fishmonger is trying to butcher a very rare fish! Not only is it huge, but its scales are ridiculously tough, so he’s failed repeatedly. At last, he said, ‘All right, step on up if any of you think you can do a better job!’ Now, there are challengers. People are even placing bets!”

We pushed our way through the crowd to see just what kind of huge fish it was, and...

“Oh, no... Namitaro?! Of course *he’s* tough...”

Part Ten

The large fish that lay on the cutting board was a compatriot of mine, Namitaro, who had been reincarnated into this world as a fish.



He had been lying very still, but perhaps he heard my voice, because all of a sudden he began flapping violently around like a fish that had just been caught. And he was definitely trying to make his way towards me.

“The fish has gone wild!”

“Run away! You’ll get hurt!”

“I knew that thing was a monster!”

When the crowd saw Namitaro start flailing and flopping, they all immediately began to flee. However, when the adventurers in the crowd realized he might be a monster, the more confident ones pulled out their weapons and approached him, ready to attack.

“Hey!”

“Take this!”

“You rotten monster!”

Three of them tried to attack Namitaro at once. One was wielding a two-handed sword, one had a spear, and the last had an axe. They all looked quite adept with their weapons. I couldn’t find anything to criticize about their joint attack either. But then...

“*Jama ya!*” Namitaro suddenly spoke in Japanese, telling them to get away from him, but naturally they couldn’t understand. He whipped his tail at them, and all three of the adventurers’ weapons went flying.

“*Sei, sei, sei!*” (*Take that, and that, and that!*)

Namitaro delivered a triple blow with his tail, each strike hitting an adventurer. This time, the men themselves went flying through the air.

“H-He’s a monster!”

“He’s gonna kill us! Run awaaaaay!”

Bewildered by Namitaro’s strength, the adventurers began to flee.

Meanwhile, Namitaro, who had now been branded a monster, began to quickly wriggle his way towards me, as if he were swimming across the ground.

“Run away, kid!” someone screamed when they saw the fish coming towards me. More nearby onlookers started shrieking. Jeanne was stunned and frozen in place at the sight of Namitaro approaching. Meanwhile, Primera lunged forward to try to stab him with her spear, while the triplets also readied their weapons.

“Accelerator!” Namitaro yelled, sounding like some kind of cyborg warrior. This gave him a sudden boost of speed as he came careening towards Primera. Because of that, Primera misjudged her timing and stumbled, and the triplets also missed their cue.

Namitaro kept coming straight towards me without slowing. I waited until he was so close that I was sure he wouldn’t be able to

dodge, and then...

“Take that!”

I opened the dimension bag containing Shiromaru and the others, and Namitaro barreled straight into it.

“Bye-byeeeeeeee!” Namitaro’s voice echoed through the air—once again speaking in Japanese so only I could understand.

“This thing is surprisingly useful,” I said to myself. Satisfied with this newly discovered use of the dimension bag, I closed it up. I thought I heard a sound like rocks hitting each other and Shiromaru yelping, but I decided not to worry about it. However, then the bag suddenly opened from the inside, and Shiromaru emerged with a goose egg on his head.

“Awooooo!”

He sounded pretty angry. I calmed him down, treated his bump, and promised to give him scraps of meat for dinner in order to butter him up. That cheered him up a bit, and I was about to hurry off, but then...

The fishmonger grabbed me by the shoulder. “Hey, kid. Leave that fish with me.”

After some negotiations, it was determined that I would be the rightful owner of Namitaro—but I had to pay for him, of course. And his price ended up being one gold coin, which was the equivalent of about one hundred thousand Japanese yen.

After I returned to Gramps’s manor, I made a makeshift pond (well, pretty much a puddle) and then dragged Namitaro out of the bag and threw him in. He floated upside down on the surface and didn’t even twitch, though, so the triplets started poking at him with brooms and other nearby objects.

“Tenma, how do you eat this?”

“Its scales look pretty hard. We’d have to get all the mud off first, right?”

“It looks dead, and the mud won’t come off. What should we do?”

The triplets all asked me questions in turn, and I thought I saw Namitaro move a little.

“Hm, well... I’d like to get rid of the mud, but if he’s dead, there’s nothing to be done about it. I think we should slice it up, then soak it in water with some strong seasonings and herbs.” I spoke loud enough for Namitaro to hear me.

“But what about the scales? Scales this tough are hard to remove, even together with the skin,” Jeanne said.

“Why don’t you test out Giganto’s new equipment on it? It doesn’t matter how tough those scales are—they won’t stand a chance against one blow from Giganto!” Primera suggested.

I quickly summoned Giganto. I changed his right hand into a

sword and kept his left hand the same so he could hold down Namitaro.

“Well, shall we begin?” I wielded Giganto’s left hand to hold the base of Namitaro’s tail, placing him upon a stone table in the garden. Then, while Giganto’s left hand held Namitaro firmly, I brandished his right hand, and...

“Have mercy, Tenma! Mercy!” Namitaro finally surrendered. Apparently, he didn’t think he could survive a blow from Giganto either.

“Eeek, it talked!”

“It’s a monster!”

“Tenma, hurry up and squash it!”

Startled by Namitaro suddenly speaking human language, the triplets quickly hid behind me. Their kitty ears and tails stood on edge, and they looked like they were about to jump out of their skins at any moment. It was easy to forget, but moments like this made me remember they really were part cat.

Primera and Jeanne didn’t scream, but they were both frozen on the spot, looking quite shocked. Primera came to her senses first, standing in front of Jeanne with her sword drawn. Meanwhile, Jeanne assumed a spellcasting stance.

I didn’t know if any of them could even do any damage to Namitaro. Regardless, I wasn’t about to just let my friends fight each other without saying anything.

“Ah, don’t worry, everyone. He’s a friend of mine.” I introduced Namitaro to the others as he wriggled himself to the ground below.

He raised a pectoral fin in greeting. “Hello! I’m Namitaro! Nice to meet you!” he said in a cheerful voice. However, the girls seemed stuck on the notion that a talking fish had to be a monster, and didn’t know how to respond now that they’d learned he was a friend of mine. “Oh, you don’t have to be so nervous. I’m just a fish. Let’s be friends!” He expertly wriggled his body to come even closer.

“Meow! Don’t come over here!”

“Monster!”

“Gross!”

The triplets couldn’t bear to see Namitaro approaching them and began to scream, trying to flee. At this, Namitaro locked onto them and began chasing after them.

“Tenma, are you sure he’s a friend of yours?” Primera asked.

“What is that thing, Tenma?” Jeanne pointed at Namitaro as he chased the triplets in circles.

“Yeah, we met after I left Kukuri Village. I don’t know the specifics, but I believe he’s technically a fish. Don’t hold me to that, though.”

As I spoke, the triplets came running back towards us.

“Hey, hey! You three are pretty stubborn!” Namitaro said. It looked to me like he was going easy on them and just teasing them—he was chasing them, but keeping his distance.

I watched silently for a while, but things were getting too chaotic and I decided to settle everyone down. I waited for the perfect timing, when Namitaro was close enough, and opened my dimension bag before leaping at him.

“Not so fast!” Not wanting to fall for the same trick twice, Namitaro tried to jump over me. However... “You little...!”

...I used magic to create a thick clay wall where he was about to land.

“Oof!”

Distracted by my bag, he was unable to dodge the wall and slammed right into it, at which point he finally stopped moving. Once he was stuck in the wall, the triplets grabbed nearby branches and wooden brooms. They started whacking him repeatedly, and since I figured they wouldn’t do much damage with those weapons, I let them continue until they’d had their fill. He’d brought this upon himself, after all.

“Well, he might be pretty cocky and kind of suspicious, but I think he’s pretty harmless unless you turn him against you,” I said.

“That’s me!” Namitaro replied.

The triplets’ weapons were no match for Namitaro’s tough scales. And once they were done, he greeted everyone again.

“By the way, Namitaro... Is it just me, or is your accent even stranger than last time?” When I’d first met him, he’d spoken with an unusual accent. Now, the way he spoke seemed to have an even weirder mix of characteristics of languages from our previous world.

“You experience a lot when you live as long as I have!” He gave me this strangely enlightened answer, but actually, I had a feeling he had probably just forgotten how to speak Japanese properly since it had been so long. Plus, he was a koi—he wasn’t a human.

Namitaro looked quite satisfied with himself, but I decided to make one thing clear. “Namitaro, just so you know—you’re currently my property. That means you’re working for me now.” Since I had bought him from the fishmonger, I was now considered his owner. But I was surprised by how easily he accepted this.

“Sure! I’ve got no problem working for you, Tenma!”

And thus, I decided to add him as a member of my team for the tournament. At the rate things were going, I wasn’t even sure if I needed to participate myself.

Currently, my team members were as follows:

Rocket: Rank B to A equivalent

Shiromaru: Rank S equivalent

Solomon: Rank B equivalent

Namitaro: Rank S equivalent or above (underwater only, capabilities on land unknown)

Honestly, I wasn't sure that I could estimate Rocket's true strength. I wouldn't have been surprised if he were actually equivalent to S rank. Solomon was still a baby, but since he could fly, that gave him an advantage. At any rate, the average ranking of my followers was above A, and I doubted any other teams could say the same.

While I pondered this, I realized that the triplets, Primera, and Jeanne were whispering back and forth to each other.

"Who is Tenma, anyway?"

"First he had Rocket and Shiromaru, then Solomon, and now Namitaro is his follower? They're all super strong monsters!"

"Namitaro is creepy..."

"Not only is Tenma good with a sword, but he's a skilled sorcerer, and even his martial arts skills are top-notch! He's beyond amazing at this point!"

"And to top it off, he knows about medicine, cooking, and lots of other things too..."

It seemed the five of them were talking about me. They were speaking softly so I wouldn't hear them, but all I had to do was boost my physical abilities ever so slightly and I could hear them clear as day.

As I waited for them to finish talking, I thought about making a place for Namitaro to live. But when I turned around to discuss it with him, I saw that, for some reason, he was waving his pectoral fin up towards the second floor of the manor.

I followed his gaze and saw Gramps standing there. Gramps and I made eye contact, and then he quickly came down to greet us. "What's this, Tenma? Did you get a new follower?" he asked.

I introduced him to Namitaro.

"Whassup! The name's Nami! Nice to meet ya!" Once again, his personality seemed to have changed.

"Oh, you can talk! How unusual! I'm Merlin, Tenma's grandpa. Nice to meet you." Gramps didn't seem fazed by Namitaro's speech, which I thought was rather amazing, in more than one way. The two of them immediately warmed up to each other and began chatting without me. That made me feel a little lonely, actually...

Feeling slightly sad, I decided to begin construction on a pond for Namitaro by myself. It would be about ten by twenty meters wide, and one to one-and-a-half meters deep. I used Earth magic to harden

the edges of the pond and make a rock border. I figured it wouldn't break easily and would keep debris out, so the water would stay clear. Then I used Water magic to fill it with water, but I wasn't sure how to keep it oxygenated. Namitaro said he would figure it out himself, though, so I decided to let him take care of it.

By the time I was finished with the lake, the five of them were done talking, and we began to discuss dinner. However, Aura and the others hadn't returned yet—it seemed Aina and Kriss's lecture was still in progress. So, this time, I decided to do the cooking. As of late, I'd either been eating out or had Aina cook for me. I decided to show off my skills for a change and make the curry I'd been dreaming about for a while.

Actually, the other day I found a dish at a food stall that used some spices, and asked the cook how they made it. Since it was a kebab dish, combining the recipe they gave me with what I knew was pretty experimental, but there was nothing I could do about that. I'd try to do my best without wasting any food.

After a bit of prodding—I bought over fifty kebabs—the vendor taught me the recipe for his spice mixture. Then, I bought the necessary spices at a shop he'd told me about.

First, you had to caramelize a large amount of onions, then cut potatoes, carrots, and beef into bite-size pieces and add them to the pot. Next, pour water into the pot and bring it to a boil, then simmer for a while, removing the scum from the top. Meanwhile, place some flour in a frying pan and cook until golden brown, being careful not to burn it. Mix the flour and half the spices together, then pour broth into the pan and slowly dissolve the spice mixture. Lastly, combine all ingredients and then do a taste test, adjusting the spice level to your liking.

I followed this recipe, and after about an hour, I had made something that resembled curry. I decided not to make it too spicy this time, and used honey and some other ingredients to make it between sweet and medium-level spicy. I did add some of the leftover spices to my own portion to make it spicier, though.

I carried the completed curry (or curry-like concoction) into the room where everyone was sitting. I'd left the rice to Jeanne, so it was cooked a little softer than I would've liked, but that wasn't a problem. Aina and the others had returned while I was cooking, but only Aina apologized for not helping.

I opened the lid of the curry pot, filling the entire room with the scent of spices. The ones who had never had curry before looked surprised, particularly the triplets. No one seemed against giving it a try, though, so I dished up a scoop of rice on each plate, then poured a ladleful of thick brown curry over it.

“Let’s eat!” I put my hands together, then dug into the curry with my spoon. *Ooh, it actually tastes right!* The overwhelming first impression I had was that it tasted more nostalgic than delicious—after all, it had been over fifteen years since I’d last had curry. I shoveled it into my mouth, gobbling it up. Once everyone else saw my reaction to the food, they followed suit.

“The flavor is strange. I like how it’s slightly spicy, though,” Gramps said.

“I’ve never seen spices used like this before. I’ve had soup made with spices like this, but never with a flour-based roux poured over rice,” Aina commented.

“It’s not bad. I don’t think I could eat it if it were any spicier, but I could get addicted to this,” Kriss said.

“I know! I’m not sure if it’s because of the spices or what, but my tummy feels warm and I’m starting to sweat,” Primera said, wiping her forehead.

Meanwhile...

“Meow, spicy! Spicy! I need water!”

“My tongue is burning!”

“There’s too much spice!”

“Tenma, I don’t like this...”

The triplets and Jeanne didn’t seem to like it too much.

“Tenma, dish me out another helpin’! Also, that lass over there hasn’t moved since she got back, y’know!” Namitaro said, using another weird accent, as he gobbled up his curry. The “lass” he was talking about was Aura, whose eyes had looked lifeless ever since her sister had brought her back.

“Here, Namitaro. And here you go, Aura.”

I gave Namitaro another helping, then scooped up a spoonful of my curry, added a bunch more spice to it, and shoved it into Aura’s mouth.

“Wah. Wah...? Wh-Wh-Whaaat is this?!” Pulled back to her senses by the power of curry, Aura let out a noise quite unbecoming for a young girl. Yes, the great power of curry...

“Master Tenma! Please give me some water!” In a panic, Aura took the cup I offered her and gulped it down. She was immediately scolded by Aina for her actions.

Despite all that, I thought my first curry was a pretty decent success. By the way, my final impression was: *It’s definitely curry, but it’s somehow different from what I wanted.*

After dinner, Aina and Kriss returned to the castle, Primera went back to her knights, and the triplets went back to their inn. And after Namitaro had a drink with Gramps, he returned to his pond in the garden. I caught him on the way back and decided to ask him

something that had been on my mind all day.

“Hey, Namitaro. So you were caught again, huh?”

A serious look came over his face. He said, “Tenma, if you think I get caught a lot just because I’m a fish, you’re wrong.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

“I fell asleep while I was swimming and got caught in a net, that’s all!” For some reason, he puffed out his chest as he said this. I shouldn’t have been worried about him in the first place!

“Why didn’t you just run away, then?”

“I thought about it, but they were hauling a bunch of shellfish and stuff along with me. I ate too much and fell asleep again...for about ten days. By the time I woke up, I was on that chopping block! Out of the frying pan and into the fire, as they say!” Namitaro said with a laugh. I wondered if he knew how close he’d actually been to being cooked up?

At any rate, that was how we spent the night before the tournament...

Part Eleven

“And now, the Victory Prayer Imperial Martial Arts Festival, sponsored by the royal family, shall begin!” Crown Prince Caesar’s words echoed throughout the arena as he kicked off the tournament. A beat later, cheers which were loud enough to shake the bleachers erupted from both audience and participants alike.

The cheers continued for a while, but then the king rose and held up a hand, silencing the crowd.

“I know you’ve all waited a long time for this. We have a record number of participants for this year’s tournament, so I’m sure there will be many spectacular matches. Make full use of the power you’ve cultivated, and seize glory with your own hands!” At the conclusion of the king’s speech, more loud cheers rang out. After that, an official gave a brief explanation of the tournament, and the participants were temporarily dismissed.

It was currently around 10 a.m., and the preliminary rounds for the individual matches were scheduled to start at 11. As such, everyone except those who would be participating in the individual matches either left the arena or went up into the audience.

The total number of individual participants, including myself, exceeded six hundred and fifty, which was an increase of nearly two hundred from last year. Since there wasn’t that much space in the waiting area for that many participants, each preliminary group gathered outside the arena to wait and make it fair for everyone.

A maximum of thirty-two people would advance to the final round. Among them, four who had advanced to the semifinals in the previous tournament were given seed rights (meaning they were exempt from having to qualify). The remaining participants were divided up into fourteen groups for the prelims to determine the other twenty-eight finalists.

However, one of the participants who had won seed rights had to withdraw due to a last-minute injury. Because of that, twenty-nine of us would now proceed to the finals. Previously, a maximum of two people per group were allowed to advance, but because of this little wrinkle, the numbers were off. As such, a special rule had been created for this tournament to allow one group to have a maximum of three finalists.

Up until now, if someone withdrew or there were enough injuries to make it so that there weren’t two participants left standing, adjustments would be made by creating a seed round in the main match. But they didn’t want to have too many seeds, because that

would lower the income they made from taking bets on each match.

Fortunately (or unfortunately?) for me, I was sorted into the group where three of us would advance to the finals. The other groups had forty-five people each, but my group had sixty-five. Given that we were told three of us would advance from this group, there was nothing we could do about those numbers.

The preliminary rounds were held with two groups in the arena at a time, with my group going last. Out of all the participants I knew, only Jin and Galatt were taking part in the individual competition this year. However, luckily, they were both in separate groups, so if we were to face each other, it would only be in the finals. Jin was in the first group, and Galatt was in the other group that progressed simultaneously with my group. The opponent I was most cautious of—the Bandit King—wasn't going up against any of us either. He would be fighting with the group before mine and Galatt's matches.

There was always a qualified staff member nearby who was available to confirm the rules and answer any questions. By the way, these were the rules:

1. Participants who do not arrive at the designated area by the start of the match shall be disqualified.

2. During the preliminary rounds, if any participant attacks anyone other than their designated opponent, they shall be disqualified.

3. If you fall outside the arena for your battle, you shall be disqualified.

4. If the referee judges that the match cannot continue, the participants shall be disqualified.

5. If you deliberately attack a participant who has been disqualified, you shall be disqualified.

6. Any participant who disobeys the referee's instructions or orders shall be disqualified.

7. Items other than weapons and armor cannot be used; however, you may bring spare weapons with you.

Though these were the basic rules, exceptions could be made if one had a valid reason. There were also other, more detailed rules, but these were the major ones to be aware of.

“Hey! There he is. Hey, Tenma!” As my group was resting in the gathering area, I heard Galatt's voice from nearby. “Long time no see!” He called my name loudly, so the other people in my group turned to look at me for the first time. They seemed surprised that there was a kid like me participating in the festivities, but as none of them engaged me, I just decided to ignore them in return. Galatt noticed their gazes, and had a look of sympathy in his eyes...but this

was directed at the people around him and not at me.

“Everyone has the same reaction when they see you for the first time, Tenma. They make fun of you and glare at you, but we’ll see who the real idiots are in the end,” he said, in a voice only I could hear.

At any rate, as there wasn’t anyone with real talent in my group, I hoped things would play out according to Galatt’s theory.

“So, how are things in your group, Galatt?”

“Hm? Ah, there are some who seem kinda strong. But the biggest threat is, the runner-up from the year before last is in my group. It all depends on how things go with him.”

Although that person had been the runner-up the year before last, he had lost in the first round of last year’s tournament, so I didn’t think there was much in the way of a difference between his abilities and Galatt’s.

“But since he has a track record, I feel like several people will rush to attack him first. I think that’ll start a melee.”

Galatt told me his strategy was to get through the first round without taking much damage—basically, to fly under the radar. In general situations, it was a poor strategy, but in some sense it was the right way to fight a battle royale.

As we were discussing this, the staff came to inform us that the first finalists had been selected.

“Oh, it looks like Jin won his battle easily!”

Galatt looked happy when the staff member said that Jin had advanced to the final round.

“I guess there weren’t many magicians in Jin’s group. And even if there were, they were probably defeated in that first melee.”

“Most magicians were probably defeated before they even finished chanting their first spell. Well... Most of them, anyway,” Galatt said, giving me a sidelong glance.

Meanwhile, the officials were reading out the name of the finalists who’d made it thus far. Judging from the reactions of those around us, it seemed that the four finalists, including Jin, had advanced to the finals in the previous tournament as well. It appeared that things had gone down as expected.

“I won’t lose either! Let’s win our matches, Tenma!” Excited, Galatt left to return to his group.

Apparently, those participating in the second half were free to do as they pleased until their group was called, so we passed the time by wandering around the nearby stalls and watching the matches. By the time my group was finally up, the sun had almost set.

“Participants of the final group, please gather in the tunnel entrance to the arena,” an attendant called.

I lined up on the spot. The attendant checked our names, then we were guided into the venue. Of course, no one was late.

“Please wait here.” We were led to a waiting room where we could view the inside of the arena. The previous group’s match had just begun.

One group started off quietly by taking the wait-and-see approach, but the other ran headfirst into the arena right off the bat, starting a brawl. Suddenly, I saw some of the participants being blown away, flying through the air. And I saw that the Bandit King was the cause.

He was smashing his opponents with his large axe, demonstrating his overwhelming strength. Because of that, a void naturally formed around him, with no one challenging him to a fight. When he took a step forward, the other participants took two steps back, creating a sort of stalemate which made the audience start booing.

Annoyed that none of his opponents would engage him, the Bandit King rushed towards the one in front of him at a speed that you wouldn’t have imagined he was capable of, based on his physique. One blow from his axe not only knocked out his opponent, but several other participants were sent hurtling out of the arena as well.

The remaining participants began to realize that there was no way they’d survive if they stayed passive. Even though there was no signal, all the remaining participants charged at the bandit king at the same time. They were trying to defeat him with sheer force of numbers, but since they were all so afraid, they weren’t able to coordinate their attacks effectively, and therefore didn’t stand a chance against him.

One swing of the Bandit King’s axe took out several of them, and before long, all of them were blown out of the arena. Now the only one who remained in the ring was the Bandit King, and the sight of him standing there alone really made him look like a king, which the audience seemed to find fascinating.

“That’s enough!” The referee must have been entranced by the Bandit King’s display of strength too, because he was a bit late in calling the match to a close. At this signal, the Bandit King calmly descended from the arena and returned to the waiting room.

Immediately afterwards, the referee reported that only the Bandit King would be advancing from that group to the finals, which meant that there would only be twenty-seven people advancing in total.

The Bandit King received thunderous applause from the audience, even though the other group that had been competing at the same time on the other end of the arena was still fighting. The audience seemed to grow impatient with them and it was clear they just wanted the remaining group to hurry up and finish, which put those participants in a difficult situation.

In the end, the winners of that group were a first-time participant

in the tournament and a first-time finalist. Once the previous group had exited the arena, it was finally time for my group to fight.

I took a glance at the royal box, where the king had been sitting before. The royal family was all there; I saw Mizaria sitting in a wheelchair next to the Minister of Finance. Then I shifted my gaze to look over at the nobles' seats, and for some reason, I saw Gramps there, along with Jeanne, Aura, Primera, and the triplets. I guessed they had used Primera's connections as Duke Sanga's daughter to get prime seats.

There was no more time to observe the audience because we were now being placed randomly throughout the arena.

"The final match of the preliminary round shall now begin!" the referee called out.

My first opponent was a large man in full body armor who was right behind me. Apparently, he thought I'd be the easiest to beat because I was a kid, and rushed in without any plan.

"Take that! Huh...?"

I swung my leg towards him, making contact with his foot before it hit the ground as he rushed towards me. As a result, he fell and became slightly dazed. Before he came back to his senses, I grabbed his legs and held them under my armpits as I swung him around in circles with all my strength.

"Bwaah! Urghh! Waaah!"

I continued using "Giant Swing" on the man, gradually moving towards the central area, which had become a full-out melee. Occasionally I knocked away participants who got caught up in the radius of my Swing attack. The man's armor was fairly well crafted, and although there were some dents in it here and there, I didn't see any major warping or broken parts, so it was serving as an amazing weapon for me.

As the participants in the central area had finally noticed my Giant Swing, I decided to throw him...right in the middle of them. I released the armored man's body, and he hurtled through the air like a cannonball, knocking away the participants who'd failed to escape like a bunch of bowling pins.

I took advantage of that opportunity to jump into the center of the arena myself. Since everyone had run away from the man, there was an empty space there. The participants around me looked stunned as I charged in, and all glared at me at once, but then...

"Freeze!"

I froze the surface of the arena to resemble a skating rink, and all the participants who tried to attack me began slipping and falling.

"Downburst!" I created a vortex of downdrafts, all centered on me. If I kept that up I'd take damage too, but I adjusted the magical

energy I used so I wouldn't be harmed. The combination of Downburst plus the frozen arena made it so that the remaining participants gradually began to move outside the arena. Though they desperately tried to stay on their feet, they all ended up sliding out of the icy ring.

Everyone looked completely stunned by this denouement, from the referees to the audience. But the participants were the most shocked of all—after all, even though all of them had been disqualified by being pushed out of the ring, most of them weren't seriously injured and were still in good condition to fight again.

I stood alone in the middle of the arena. Since the referee hadn't given the signal that the match was over, I couldn't leave without permission. However, I grew impatient and wanted to hear the signal already, so I looked towards the king instead of the refs. His Majesty noticed my gaze and slowly rose to his feet.

"Referee! The match is over!" he said.

At these words, the referee came back to his senses and called an end to the match. I went to exit the arena. However, three of the participants went over to complain to the referees.

"You can't be serious! I can still fight!" A man who was wearing splendid armor and carrying a great sword (and who seemed to be the most conceited of them all) shouted.

"How can anyone accept this result?!"

"There's no way a kid can use magic like that unless he cheated! This is a farce!"

Two other men wearing even fancier armor shouted by the first man's side.

Ignoring them, I stepped down from the area. I heard the men cursing and shouting at me, but I was unbothered as I walked towards the waiting room.

"Hey! That kid's getting away! Seize him!" The first man to complain yelled at the opponents surrounding him, but they just gave him cool looks and didn't move.

Meanwhile... "Guards! Arrest those three! They are criminals who have defiled the Imperial Martial Arts Festival!" Lyle von Blumere Krastin, the Minister of Military Affairs, had at some point descended from the royal box seats to shout that order.

The three men were immediately taken into custody. They put up quite a fight with the guards, who held them down and attacked them. By the time they were tied up, they had all lost consciousness.

"There will always be sore losers like those three... Or at least, people who can't accept the results. However, all losing here means is that you were more inexperienced than the victor. Take this as a lesson and do your best next time," Lyle said to the participants of the previous match.

Seeming to understand that a battle royale would end in such a way, they all fell to their knees with their heads bowed.

The audience applauded Lyle's swift actions and also clapped for the defeated participants as they left the arena. However, the other group's battle was still in progress.

While the audience was paying attention to my group's battle and the idiots who'd made a commotion afterwards, along with Lyle's speech, only a third of the participants were left in the other group, and I had a feeling it would be over soon. In the end, the winners of that group were Galatt and a veteran adventurer.

"Phew! Thanks for your support, Tenma!" That was the first thing Galatt said after he entered the waiting room, quite some time after me.

Apparently, his group had been waiting and watching for a while, but when the rest of the participants saw the spell I cast, they were so surprised they became confused. That confusion spread to the rest of the participants and they panicked, rushing into a melee. Not only that, but since it was so chaotic, most of the participants were defeated without even getting the chance to demonstrate their abilities.

I asked him what I had to do with any of that, and he replied, "Huh? Well, nothing you do surprises me anymore. But the average person would be completely bewildered at the sudden sight of two huge magic spells like that coming from the other side. But since I knew you were over there and probably the reason for the spells, I was able to show off my skills without panicking."

However, as Galatt was already a member of a famous group of adventurers, I had a feeling he would've won anyway, even if the others hadn't been at a disadvantage.

Just then, a staff member came over to us and explained what would happen next. Basically, he said, "Congratulations on qualifying for the finals. We will announce the matchups for the final round on the morning of the finals. Please don't be late."

After that, Galatt and I were about to leave the waiting room, but then—

"Oh! Tenma, can you stay here for a moment?" the staff member asked.

Galatt gave me a sidelong glance and said, "Jin and the others are waiting for me. I'm going to go ahead and leave," then left the room without another word.

"Is there a problem? I don't believe I did anything against the rules..." I said.

The staff member shook their head emphatically. "No, no! We know you didn't do anything against the rules. However, some of the

nobles who watched the match earlier are asking to meet with you. My supervisor has prepared a countermeasure for this kind of situation, though, so please wait here for a while.”

I told him I really didn’t want to meet with the nobles, but he begged me with tears in his eyes to please reconsider, because if I didn’t, that would really cause trouble for him. In the end, I relented and remained in the waiting room.

I had waited for about ten minutes when he came back into the room with two other people. It seemed that they were apparently the countermeasure.

“Please follow us,” the staff member said, and they led me towards the exit.

Meanwhile, near the exit...

“That brat Tenma sure is slow...”

“It hasn’t been long since the match ended, Baron. He’s probably just resting since he used such powerful magic.”

“It seems he’s waiting to talk to Tenma too. I can’t believe he thinks he’s going to speak to him first, since he’s just a lowly baron!”

“Please calm down, Master. Even if he does speak to Tenma first, you are higher in status, so you should not hesitate to approach the boy. Even though he is very powerful, in the end, he’s just an inexperienced boy. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to be approached by a viscount such as yourself rather than a baron.”

Several oblivious lower-ranking nobles were standing there chatting with their attendants. They must have only recently come to the royal capital, or else they would already have heard rumors about Tenma from fellow nobles in their factions.

Just then, Tenma appeared at the exit. From where they were, it was difficult to see who was accompanying him. On top of that, they were all trying to outwit the other nobles to get to Tenma first, and their laser focus on him caused quite the commotion. They all raced towards him at once, but then...

“How dare you!!!”

...they were chastised by the person standing next to Tenma.

“Duke Sanga?!” they all exclaimed at once.

Duke Sanga was a high-ranking aristocrat and one of the most influential and powerful people in the kingdom. The nobles who’d rushed over had no idea that the duke would be walking with Tenma, and all of them were taken aback.

“You all seem to know nothing of etiquette. How dare you approach a duke in this manner?”

This was a misunderstanding, of course, but one couldn’t blame him for his interpretation of the situation.

“If I were here for a public appearance, I could dismiss you all immediately!” Duke Sanga raised his voice even further. However, Tenma was fully aware that this was all an act—part of the “countermeasure” the staff member had mentioned—so he didn’t look shocked to hear the duke speak like this. In fact, he glared at the nobles while they were being lectured by the duke.

“I-It’s a misunderstanding, Your Grace. I merely...”

“Oh? You were rude to a duke because of a misunderstanding? You’ve got some nerve!” Refusing to hear a word that was said, the duke spoke in an even colder and deeper voice, startling the other nobles. They immediately knelt on the ground and begged for forgiveness

“Father, I think that’s enough. Everyone makes mistakes. As nobles, we must take the higher ground and forgive them. Plus, you’re putting Tenma in an uncomfortable position, raising your voice like that.” The person who soothed the duke was Primera, wearing not her usual armor, but a blue dress. She sounded a bit as if she were reading off a script, but the nobles were so busy begging for forgiveness that there was but a slim chance they would notice.

“Hrm, that’s certainly true... I’ll make an exception and overlook it just this once. But there won’t be a next time!”

The nobles all looked relieved that their lives had been saved. Duke Sanga gave Tenma a look, then they ignored the nobles and walked away together.

Part Twelve

"I know they were there to see me, but you're terrible, Duke Sanga."

"Of course I am. I'm a noble. Besides, it was a good lesson for them. They need to learn how important it is to be well-informed before they jump into action. By the way..." His gaze shifted to Primera. For some reason, she seemed nervous and didn't notice his gaze.

I nodded slightly, then walked over to her. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss. I'm an old acquaintance of the duke's. My name is Tenma and I'm an adventurer." Primera looked slightly annoyed, but all the same, I knelt down in front of her and took her hand. I didn't kiss it, though...

Primera was completely shocked by my behavior. The moment I took her hand, she let out a strange shriek, so I didn't do anything else.

"T-Tenma! What kind of joke is this?! Please stop—it's embarrassing!" Her face turned bright red, and she pushed away my hand, taking several steps backwards. She was no longer nervous. Instead, she was angry.

"Well, it's the first time I'm seeing you dressed like a lady, isn't it? I thought I should greet you in a manner befitting a noble."

Of course, I'd met Primera many times before, but she was always wearing armor, and I'd only ever thought of her as a knight. I'd never once seen her wear a dress before, so when she showed up wearing one, blessing us with the rare drop of Lady Primera, daughter of Duke Sanga, I couldn't resist the urge to tease her, and the duke himself encouraged it!

Speaking of my accomplice, he was currently where his daughter couldn't see him, suppressing his laughter.

"I know I don't look good in a dress, but you don't have to tease me about it!" She mistakenly thought that's why I was teasing her, but in fact, she looked really beautiful in it.



Primera had inherited her good looks from her father, and as the daughter of a duke, had received the finest education, so her manners were impeccable. And since she was a knight captain, her body was toned from training and her posture was exceptional. She cared about her health, and took wonderful care of her skin and hair.

If I had to evaluate her, I would definitely classify her as a beautiful woman, but I wouldn't be including her personality in the mix. The number one thing she was lacking was self-confidence.

I digress, but I'd heard from Leena, Primera's friend, that every time someone called Primera beautiful, she would just think they were being polite, and all the women around her were quite jealous of her.

I was about to clear up the misunderstanding, but the duke interjected. "Primera. Tenma would never tease you. Trust me—I know this because he's acting the same way I did when I was courting your mother! Of course, Tenma isn't trying to court you, but men just act that way when they see a beautiful woman like you!" The duke began to give the narrative his own little twist, and also shot me a sidelong glance, soliciting my agreement.

Of course, I couldn't just say that wasn't my intention at all and that I was just teasing her. In the end, I just nodded vaguely.

"O-Oh, is that right?" Primera murmured, her cheeks flushing for another reason now.

No longer able to stand the awkward atmosphere, I asked the duke something that had been on my mind. "Did you come to get me at the king's suggestion?"

"Yes, that's right. Very perceptive of you, Tenma," the duke admitted.

That just raised another question in my mind. "Why didn't the king or Prince Lyle or the archduke come themselves, then?"

Knowing those three, they would never have passed up the opportunity for drama. The duke let out a dry chuckle. "You know them well. At first, His Majesty tried to come himself, but since it would look bad for the king to personally escort a participant in the tournament, Prince Lyle and the archduke convinced him not to. Then the queen found out about his scheme, and in no time, Primera and I were given the task. The three of them received a severe scolding from Her Majesty."

The duke and Primera were summoned in a hurry, but it had taken a while for Primera to change.

"Well, think of this as me showing my gratitude," the duke said.

"For what?"

Apparently, he had bet on my match and won quite a lot of money. At first, the odds on me were about thirty to one—I was the

least popular pick in my group. However, the odds of my winning improved three times after that, and in the end, I became the favorite to win in my group.

I had Duke Sanga, Marquis Sammons, and my friends to thank for that. There seemed to be a tacit agreement that the royal family wouldn't be personally participating in betting during this tournament, so the odds had remained as they were. However, according to the duke, if the royal family *had* been able to participate, the odds would have shown that I was easily a lock to win, and if I did poorly, the dividend would simply be refunded.

According to what I heard later, it turned out that Duke Sanga, the marquis, and I all made big bets of 1,000,000G each, while Gramps bet 500,000G. By the way, participants were allowed to bet on themselves, but the punishment for match-fixing was slavery.

After that, we didn't run into any more trouble, and I arrived back at the mansion safely.

The next day was the preliminaries for the individual matches, but since no one I knew was fighting, I wasn't particularly interested. Instead, I decided to put up a barrier in the garden and have my team members practice coordinating their attacks for tomorrow's team match.

I had wondered how our joint attacks would go now that Namitaro had joined the team, but we didn't get much accomplished. Namitaro kept getting carried away, then Shiromaru would get roped up into it and goof off too, then Solomon would join in, then Rocket would get mad at them. That kept happening over and over again, and in the end, I decided that we'd just have to use a strategy of adapting on the fly.

As such, I decided to finish things up early and relax at the mansion. It was incredibly quiet there today, and perfect for relaxing. It was peaceful because Kriss (who had been given permission to join the triplets and Primera on their team), the triplets, and Primera were all practicing for the team event, so they hadn't come to the mansion; and Jeanne, Aura, and Aina had gone with them to watch. Gramps was reluctantly visiting Ernest, who had asked him to come over, and he still hadn't returned.

It would've been the perfect day for a walk, but the capital was just too packed due to the festival, and I'd noticed people deliberately walking past the front of the mansion. There were three types of people who were doing this.

The first were commoners who had seen my match yesterday and were genuinely curious about me. They were casually strolling past the mansion hoping to get a peek at me.

The second was people who wanted to make my acquaintance.

These were either nobles or the nobles' attendants.

However, the third group—those who saw me as an enemy—was the biggest problem. Among them were those who seemed to be nobles' attendants, adventurers, or commoners who had shady side businesses.

I had a feeling that most people in the third group were those who had lost bets and then found out where I lived, because they glared at me as they walked past. However, the nobles' attendants and shady merchants didn't seem to be just passing by.

I used Identify on all the ones who seemed particularly suspicious, made detailed notes on their appearances, and decided to discuss it with Gramps later. There were various crime-prevention devices installed in the mansion, so I didn't think it would be easy for any of them to get inside, but I decided to increase the number of golems on guard just in case. I put more golems outside in any place I thought would be a likely route for invaders to try to utilize, such as near windows, doors, and the back of the mansion, as well as places that were hard to see. I also increased the number of golems inside the mansion—mainly in the hallways.

Honestly, it felt a bit like overkill. After all, I made one hundred new golems. Along with the ones I had before, that made a total of one hundred fifty. In addition to that, I added more magic and magic tools to the mansion's security equipment. Even if a thousand knights attacked while Gramps and I were away, they'd have a hard time taking this place down.

After I finished beefing up our security, I couldn't think of anything else to do, and went to sleep in my room. But then Gramps came home and quickly found out about the new security measures. He seemed exasperated by them.

"Tenma, just what do you think is going to attack us? This is no longer a home, but a fortress!"

I was aware that I had gone too far...but I didn't feel bad in the slightest!

A few days later, the king and the others (though they were called back by Queen Maria and picked up by Dean not even thirty minutes after they'd arrived) stopped by for an unannounced visit. They agreed with Gramps. By the way, Jeanne and Aura were also completely unaware that I had fortified the mansion.

The preliminary matches for the team competition would be on the following day. There were 136 teams competing in the event, which was said to be the third-highest number of participants in the tournament's history. Each qualifying round would have sixteen teams.

However, of course, there wasn't space to have all the qualifying

teams in the arena at once. Thus, after we'd all gathered there first thing in the morning, a lottery was held to divide us up into groups. The teams would instead fight at temporary venues set up all over the capital.

These were the people I knew who were competing in the team battle: The triplets and Primera's temporary team, the "Gunjo Flowers." The team led by Jin, the "Dawnswords." The team of Marquis Sammons's followers led by Gulliver, the "Demon Soldiers." And lastly, teams created by the Tamers' Guild from Sagan City—Sagan Tamers A, Sagan Tamers B, and Sagan Tamers C.

I wished I could say that my friends and I were all put in different groups, but unfortunately, I ended up with Sagan Tamers B, the Gunjo Flowers, the Demon Soldiers, the Dawnswords, and Sagan Tamers C in my group.

For the Tamers' Guild teams, team A consisted of Agris and three of his grappler apes, team B consisted of Wright and four of his hardlynxes and Ted with his thunderbird follower, and team C consisted of the Saqalat brothers and their flame tigers and mountain turtle followers.

Ted and Wright were pretty upset by the lottery results. Agris told me both of them had said, "We're finished..."

There were eight teams in my group, and our venue was a vacant lot outside the capital. Each participant was required to be at the venue by noon, and instead of using a shuttle bus like we might have in my old world, there was a shuttle carriage. I went ahead and rode in one with Ted and Wright.

"We have the worst luck, getting put in Tenma's group. Don't we, Wright?"

"We sure do, but there's nothing to be done about it. After all, our main goal here is to raise awareness for the Tamers' Guild!"

"That's true. So we can lose without having to worry about Tenma!"

"How pathetic..." I listened to the two of them exchange negative remarks as our carriage headed towards the venue.

The temporary venue wasn't very large, but there were quite a few spectators already gathered there. I wondered why, and one of the staff members said to me, "I know it seems strange, but it's because you're participating, Tenma."

I was clearly puzzled, so he went on to explain in more detail. According to him, I was apparently one of the "participants to watch," and when everyone heard I was participating in a team match, they were curious about who would be on my team. As such, many spectators had come to see me. Having told me this, the staff member returned to his duties.

There were tents set up at the venue as makeshift waiting rooms for us, and each participating team was provided with one. Teams who had already arrived were doing warm-up exercises around the tents.

The spectators seemed to be watching these warm-ups to try and decide which team to bet on. It was like we were in a horse-racing paddock. However, the staff hadn't told us to do so—it's just that there were many attention-seekers who were doing it to show off and promote themselves. Surely, standing out here would have a positive impact on your future employment prospects. But most of all, it just seemed like they wanted to show off their strength.

The spectators' eyes had been focused on me for a while now, and so I decided to introduce my team members. "Rocket, Shiromaru. You can come out now."

Both of them leapt out of my bag as if they had been waiting for that moment. I let Shiromaru return to his normal size, which made him very intimidating to anyone who didn't know him. By the way, he was now over three meters long.

The moment Shiromaru emerged from the bag, I heard loud cheers and shrieks from the audience. The cheers came from those who knew I was a Tamer, and since I'd written down my team members when I registered, they already knew who would be on it thanks to the information in the pamphlet.

On the other hand, the screams came from people who hadn't read the pamphlet—they seemed to be panicking at the sudden appearance of a monster. However, the screams soon stopped and became cheers for Shiromaru instead. Then, however, the loud cheering suddenly ceased, and that was all because of Rocket.

The general public thought slimes were the weakest monsters. Once a Fenrir, which was said to be the highest class of wolf-type monsters, appeared, the audience became excited, wondering who would follow in his footsteps. But when a slime, generally known as the weakest monster, appeared, it betrayed their expectations and their enthusiasm plummeted.

This didn't stop at the audience either. The opposing team was made up of burly characters, and all five of them were quite muscular, armed with a greatsword, a hammer, a great axe, clubs, and great shields. However, the moment Rocket appeared, they began to point and laugh. Clearly, they thought it was funny that a slime was participating.

My opponents' attitude made me angry, but Shiromaru was even angrier. Once he realized they were making fun of his older brother, Shiromaru started growling, intimidating the opponents.

Just as I was thinking that probably wasn't a good idea, Rocket

suddenly stood in front of Shiromaru, his body trembling slightly. He was telling him something. Shiromaru glared once at the opponents, but then backed off.

It seemed Rocket had realized Shiromaru was about to attack and had somehow convinced him to back off.

After that, Rocket took Shiromaru away as if nothing had happened, and returned to our tent.

“Hey, Tenma. Is Rocket really a slime?” Ted, who had been watching all of this happen, asked me. Honestly, I had wondered the same thing myself sometimes. Ted and Wright knew about Rocket’s powers and they were familiar with Shiromaru as well, so they knew the two were acting just as they always did. But most of our opponents and the audience became frightened by Shiromaru’s hostile growls, and were now all quiet.

“Ahh... I feel sorry for your opponents, Tenma. They made Shiromaru mad, and now they don’t have a chance.” Wright put his hands together in a gesture of sympathy for my opponents. As he did that, a staff member came over and said that the battles would be starting soon. All the participants returned to their tents and began preparations.

The first battle was between Wright and Ted’s team and a team of novice adventurers. Wright and Ted’s group dominated the whole time. First, the hardlynxes and thunderbird held their opponents back on the ground and in the air, while Wright stood at their head. Meanwhile, Ted prepared to support Wright with magic from the rear.

The adventurers made a feint at Wright, but the hardlynxes behind him circled around to put a stop to that. On the other hand, trying to deal with the hardlynxes would make the adventurers vulnerable to Wright and Ted. Thanks to Ted and Wright’s teamwork, they were able to deal with the adventurers as a group at first. However, eventually, one of the adventurers became impatient and made a beeline for the hardlynxes.

That turned out to be a grave mistake. The moment the adventurer brandished his sword at the hardlynxes, he was swept up into the air. This was the handiwork of the thunderbird, which had been watching the adventurers carefully from the start of the battle. It must have been waiting for one of the adventurers to make a move. Speaking of said adventurer, he was now caught in the thunderbird’s thick, sharp claws and flying through the air. He was attempting to attack the thunderbird, but he had been seized by his right hand. Since this was his weapon hand, he was unable to wield his sword.

The other adventurers were worried about their friend who had just been kidnapped into the sky, but they couldn’t help him because Wright and Ted headed straight for them. The moment Wright slashed

his sword at the adventurers, their friend was dropped from the sky. It wasn't fatal as he hadn't been that high up, but since he was wearing armor, he inflicted a lot of damage upon his friends by falling on them.

The devastating combo attack of Ted's Wind magic, Wright's sword, and the hardlynxes' physical attacks tipped the battle in their favor all at once. After that, they pushed their way to victory. It took a bit of time, but in the end, Sagan Tamers B won overwhelmingly. After all, the adventurers had barely been able to attack, while Wright and Ted didn't have a scratch on them.

The audience went wild at the result, and everyone praised Wright and Ted. The adventurer who had been dropped from the sky suffered a broken leg but no other major injuries, and the team retreated to their tent.

My team was called while the audience was still cheering. Shiromaru, Rocket, and I would be the only ones competing in this match. Solomon and Namitaro had the day off.

I thought it would be a waste to reveal Solomon in a preliminary round—since the tournament wasn't over yet, revealing him now would make it so there would be nothing else for people to look forward to. Regarding Namitaro, he said, "If you put me out there too, our team will be overpowered." Because of that, I decided not to have him participate in the first round.

As far as I could tell by looking at my opponents, Namitaro's theory was right. After all, they were all wearing cliché adventurers' equipment with scratches all over. Their equipment looked well-worn, but personally, I didn't understand why people continued to use damaged equipment without repairing it.

Setting aside the scratches, which were less important, it was dangerous to not repair the larger dents and gouges. After all, armor was supposed to keep you safe—but it didn't seem like that idea had registered with my opponents. They didn't seem to have noticed my gaze either, because they were focused on getting the crowd on their side. They wanted to get a gold star for defeating a Fenrir.

They might have guessed how strong I was by the audience's reaction, but I had a feeling they were hoping they could beat me with sheer numbers, and thought Shiromaru was their biggest obstacle. They kept stealing glances at him, but were completely ignoring Rocket.

Meanwhile, the referee stood between us and gave a simple explanation of the rules. Since these were the same as in the individual competition, they were of little concern.

"And...begin!" With that declaration, the referee backed away. My opponents instantly charged towards Shiromaru. Shiromaru and I both

readied ourselves to counter, but all of a sudden, Rocket went in front of us.

“Are you going to do it alone, Rocket?” I asked. When he nodded, both Shiromaru and I jumped backwards. We didn’t want to get in Rocket’s way. However, both the audience and my opponents were taken aback by this surprise attack. They thought the slime was merely acting as bait so that Shiromaru and I could put distance between ourselves and our enemies.

My opponents grinned, thinking they could finish Rocket off, and began to attack. But the moment they brandished their weapons, a shocking change occurred in Rocket’s body.

The change surprised the audience, my opponents, and even myself.

Part Thirteen

What changed about Rocket's body was that he grew—a lot. Previously, his circumference had been sixty to eighty centimeters. But suddenly, right before our eyes, he easily topped four meters—actually, he was probably closer to five.

Of course, the audience and my opponents were surprised, but none were more shocked than me. I quickly checked Rocket's status.

Name: Rocket

Age: 9

Class: Emperor Slime

Title: Tenma's Follower

Something was different about his class. He was no longer a king slime, but now an emperor...

I'd heard that slimes received new class names when they grew bigger, but before this change, there had been nothing notably different about him.

Even if some evolution prerequisite had been met, this wasn't a game. I wouldn't have imagined he'd grow so suddenly. The scene unfolding before my eyes was completely unrealistic.

While I was standing there bewildered, Rocket casually began to move as if nothing unusual had happened. First, he reached out with his much larger body and surrounded our opponents. Feelers emerged from his body as they often did, but they were much larger in number than before. If I had to guess, I'd say there were nearly a thousand of them now. At last, our opponents realized what was going on and immediately assumed defensive positions.

However, it was a little too late. Rocket's multiple feelers were already slapping them. He was just kind of whapping them, and since they were wearing armor, the feelers didn't seem like they were accomplishing much, but that didn't mean there was no damage or impact at all.

At first, the opponents started attacking his feelers and succeeded in cutting off some of them, but that barely even made a dent. In fact, the ones that they managed to cut off crawled towards Rocket as if they had a will of their own and were reabsorbed into his body. They were regenerating...

At some point, the opponents went purely on the defensive, giving up on attacking and instead curling up in balls to defend against Rocket's attacks. But this didn't stop him—in fact, it just gave him

more momentum.

Apparently, Rocket was angry that they'd made fun of him. As he was normally very calm, it was unusual to see him get this mad. I wasn't entirely sure that was what had set him off, but these attacks were certainly very vulgar.

He should have been able to sink our opponents with a single blow if he'd wanted, but instead he had surrounded them to prevent them from escaping before deliberately using low-level attacks which he could unleash in great numbers. He was torturing his opponents with attacks that couldn't kill or stun them.

If they had been a real first-class team, they could have escaped without difficulty. However, since they simply weren't at that level of skill, they'd lost all will to fight.

As our opponents had thrown down their weapons and were curled up in little balls, the referee finally went to call the match. Sensing what he was about to do, Rocket returned to his original size before the whistle blew, and returned to Shiromaru and me.

"The winner is Rocket!" The referee unintentionally shouted Rocket's name instead of the name of my team. By the way, the name of my team was Oracion. While trying to come up with a name, I looked outside and saw Valley Wind, then remembered a novel I'd read with a horse in it named Oracion. Apparently, it's Spanish for the word "prayer."

Once Rocket returned to us, now normal-sized again, I looked at him and realized what the gimmick behind his size change was. "Rocket, you made a new dimension bag inside yourself and stored your mass in it."

Thanks to my influence, Rocket could use Time-Space magic, and he had a dimension bag hidden inside his body. But it seemed that, unbeknownst to me, he'd made another one, detached the parts of his body he wasn't using, and stored them inside this bag.

The reason he'd become enormous earlier was the phenomenon that occurred when all those body parts fused together. Since the bag was inside of him, when he opened it, his body absorbed all the other body parts that had been stored inside, and he suddenly swelled up.

He shook his body up and down, affirming my theory. By the way, Shiromaru didn't look surprised for a moment about Rocket's emperor form. From this, I guessed that he had already known about it. That meant it was possible Solomon also knew—in other words, I was the only one who had been in the dark.

I gave the audience, who were still sitting in stunned silence, a sidelong glance, then made my way back to the tent. The moment we entered, they finally came back to themselves and I heard their loud cheers again.

“So when did you evolve, Emperor Rocket?” I asked once we were inside the tent. I checked his status again, and this time it just said “Slime,” as it always had before. Rocket used his entire body to apologize for hiding this from me.

Later, I learned that he had become an emperor slime back in the Sagan dungeon. When I was at my base training and studying, he’d snuck out alone and absorbed other slimes into himself.

The reason he hadn’t told me about it was that the last time I saw him absorb another slime, I had acted like it was gross.

“That’s fine, but... Just how many slimes *did* you absorb?” I asked.

He thought for a moment, then trembled.

“So many you can’t even remember?”

He nodded. At any rate, I could definitely tell that his attack power had increased since he’d become an emperor slime.

Generally, slimes evolved from regular slimes to big slimes, and then king slimes, but emperor slimes were even larger and higher up in the evolution hierarchy.

In general, this is how they were classified. Regular slimes reached up to sixty centimeters in size. Big slimes were around one meter in size, and king slimes were those over two meters. However, since slime bodies were pretty gelatinous, depending on the situation, it was difficult to tell how large they were. There were cases when adventurers attacked monsters thinking they were just ordinary slimes, but found out they were actually dehydrated king slimes when they were painfully punished for it.

However, a lot of those cases were misunderstandings based on incorrectly classifying monsters, cases of simple mistaken identity, or just stories that were made up to teach new adventurers a lesson.

As I was checking Rocket over, all the preliminary battles were coming to an end. Our second team battle would begin shortly...

My opponent was Wright and Ted’s team. This time I decided to have Shiromaru participate along with Rocket. I did some light stretches as I waited, and then a staff member came to get us. He led us to the arena and the moment I stepped inside, I heard cheers from the audience.

A few moments later, Ted and the others stepped into the arena, but most of the cheers were directed towards me, which made my opponents look quite uncomfortable.

Once the referee checked both teams’ statuses, he called for the match to begin. As for both teams’ formations—my team was in a line with me at the center. Rocket was on my right and Shiromaru was on my left, with about four meters separating each of us. Meanwhile, Ted and Wright were positioned about ten meters away from me, standing in line with their followers, spaced out roughly five meters apart. Ted

was on my right side and Wright was on my left side.

Wright's hardlynxes moved first. They ran straight at Shiromaru and kept him in check by surrounding him on both sides.

Rocket tried to come to the rescue, but Ted's thunderbird used Wind magic to keep him away, and he couldn't even get close. Using that as a distraction, Wright and Ted headed for me.

Wright used his one-handed sword in a dual-wielding style to make the most out of his physical abilities as a demi-human. Meanwhile, Ted, armed with a bow and arrows, was positioned behind Wright.

I took out a practice rod from my bag and thrust it at Wright. It seemed he hadn't anticipated that I would use that as a weapon, and just one blow from me was enough to stop him in his tracks. In the meantime, I unleashed a second thrust, but this time he easily avoided it while Ted loosed an arrow at me. The arrow narrowly missed me and pierced the ground instead. The distance between Wright and me had now widened considerably.

Shiromaru had been left to fend off the two hardlynxes by himself, but since he was so much stronger than them, I figured it would be okay to leave him alone for a while. Rocket was having a surprisingly hard time. He hadn't assumed his emperor form like in the last battle, but even if you didn't take that into account, there were very few ways of attacking airborne enemies, so he was at the mercy of their magical attacks. However, he didn't let that beat him, and slowly inched his way towards Shiromaru without the thunderbird noticing.

Five minutes had passed since the start of the match, and Rocket had moved about a meter. Shiromaru seemed to have realized what he was up to, because he pretended to be struggling with the battle as he moved closer to Rocket as well.

Since Wright and Ted were focused on me, they didn't notice Shiromaru and Rocket's tag team approaching. Then, while I was facing off against the two of them, Shiromaru and Rocket made their move.

When the distance between them was about four meters, Shiromaru suddenly jumped sideways and stepped on Rocket. Rocket bounced like a trampoline, and Shiromaru used the recoil to fly into the air and attack the thunderbird. Meanwhile, Rocket rammed into the hardlynxes, who were momentarily caught off guard by Shiromaru's trampoline move. He entangled his body around them, then used his internal bag and took on his emperor form.

Ted and Wright were stunned that their followers had been taken care of in a matter of seconds, and I used that to my advantage to knock Wright's legs out from under him and hold the rod to his throat. Meanwhile, I reached my left hand out towards Ted, showing that I

could cast magic at him at any moment.

"I surrender!" they both said at the same time. Ted threw down his bow and arrows and raised both hands. Wright also let go of his weapon as he lay on the ground.

Seeing this, the referee declared victory for my team. "The winner is Team Oracion!"

At those words, Rocket and Shiromaru released the opponents' followers, and Rocket returned to his normal size.

Ted, Wright, and the hardlynxes were not injured, but the thunderbird had been knocked out of the sky, so it had some scratches on its wings. They weren't major injuries, but I quickly cast a small Recovery magic spell on the thunderbird anyway. It let out a little cry, then energetically flapped back into the sky.

The battle had been short, but the audience seemed happy with the way our followers had fought, because they gave us a huge round of applause.

"I knew we'd lose..."

"We can't even beat Tenma alone, but then we had to get pummeled by Rocket and Shiromaru too..."

Ted and Wright were muttering as they shook my hand, then they went back outside to the tent.

Next up was the final qualifying match. I thought about staying to watch the remaining matches, but the cheers from the audience were louder than I'd expected. I decided to seek out the quiet of my tent instead.

The match took much longer than expected, so my followers entertained themselves. Shiromaru was overly excited and Rocket was doing some kind of strange dance. At first, I thought he was stretching, but then I realized he was doing some kind of MP absorption dance.

Meanwhile, Solomon poked his head out of the bag, but I wasn't planning on unveiling him until the first match of the main event, and convinced him to stay hidden for a while longer. As soon as I got him to go back inside, though, Namitaro jumped out.

"I'm gonna fight next. Right, Tenma?" He seemed so excited about it that I gave my permission, which made him very happy. "All right! Let's go!" He stood up on his tail and flapped his pectoral fins. He was making a strange noise with his mouth and I wondered if he was trying to shadowbox. If that was the case, he was doing a bad job of it.

About ten minutes later, a staff member came to my tent. Namitaro didn't even wait to hear what he had to say before jumping out of the tent and charging towards the arena.

The audience was stunned to see a huge fish suddenly enter the arena and fell silent, but once they realized he was my follower, they

began to cheer. In response, Namitaro began strutting around the arena.

I didn't follow him right away. After speaking with the staff member for a few moments, I went up into the arena. Once Namitaro saw that we had entered, he came over and lined up beside us. Then...

"The opposing team has forfeited, so the winner of this match is Team Oracion!"

"What?! I was just about to have my big moment!" Following the referee's announcement, Namitaro's voice echoed throughout the arena. The audience responded immediately with shock.

"The fish talked!!!"

Some people were too frozen to get a word out, and others were so stunned they'd fallen right out of their seats. The referee was also frozen, since he'd been closest to Namitaro when he'd spoken, but at least he hadn't fallen to the ground.

The audience's reaction was quite amusing to Namitaro, and he walked over to the stands and began putting on a show for them. As he got closer and closer, the people nearest to him began to run away, which created a chain reaction of Namitaro just getting more excited and rushing closer. I needed to do something quickly or else the situation could turn bad...

"Namitaro! Get in your house!" I opened the bag and called out to him.

"I'm not a dog, Tenma!"

"Namitaro! House!"

"Like I said..."

"House!"

"I'm not a dog!"

"House!"

"..."

"H-O-U-S-E!"

"...Fine."

I kept patiently calling him, and at last, he reluctantly got inside the bag. Once the referee saw that, he came back to his senses and gave me a warning. Afterwards, he told me about the next battle, then excused me from the ring. By the way, my warning was that if Namitaro continued acting out, or didn't follow the referee's instructions, we would be disqualified.

Luckily I had stopped Namitaro and just gotten off with a warning, but I decided I would have to give him a stern lecture later. I exchanged some words with Ted and Wright, then left the arena because Duke Sanga and the others weren't there to distract the crowd from me. I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could before I was accosted.

I concealed my presence and left the arena, but just as I suspected, there was already a crowd near the exit. Of course, that didn't mean they were specifically waiting for me, but I had a feeling they were, since I recognized people there who were connected to nobles.

On the way back to the mansion, I passed by several temporary tournament arenas, and battles were still going on at all of them. Sometimes I heard cheers and applause coming from them. I passed nearby, but since none of my acquaintances were fighting there, I didn't stay. But since there seemed to be so much enthusiasm from the crowd, I guessed that there were popular teams fighting.

As soon as I got home, I immediately put up a barrier on one side of the garden and dragged Namitaro out of the bag.

"You know what I'm going to tell you, don't you?"

"I'm sorryyyyyy!" The moment he heard my voice he flopped down on his hands and knees (or, well, fins) and begged my forgiveness. I lectured him sternly for quite some time, and just as I was finishing it up, the gate opened. Only designated people could open the gate, so I knew without looking that it was Gramps and the others.

"Don't you think that was cruel, leaving us all behind like that?" Gramps said.

"We were going to go out to eat to celebrate..." Aina said.

Behind them, Jeanne and Aura stood there panting.

"Haa, haa... M-My side is killing me..."

"Haa, haa, haa, haa..."

Apparently they'd run here at full speed, because Aura was clutching her side in pain and Jeanne couldn't even speak.

"You two are so unsightly! Just running from the arena has put you in such a state?!" Aina wasn't panting at all, and even Gramps looked fine.

Given that the arena was about ten kilometers away from the mansion, I thought that was plenty to make someone exhausted.

"S-Sister... The reason you're not tired is that you're a monster..." said Aura, having clearly not learned her lesson the last time. Even though she was muttering it quietly, she underestimated Aina's hearing.

Just as I expected, Aina heard what she'd said. She grabbed Aura by the collar and dragged her away.

"H-He..." Aura tried to ask me for help, but Aina gagged her so she couldn't speak.

As I watched them leave, I explained to Gramps why I'd left early.

"Oh, I see. That sounds troublesome," Gramps said. He told me he'd experienced the same kind of thing when he was young.

"By the way, I heard you ran all the way here. How is that

possible?" Jeanne was still collapsed on the ground, panting.

Gramps got an awkward look on his face. "At first, we were just going to send Jeanne and Aura home in the carriage, but Aina said this would be a perfect training opportunity, and asked me to cast Boost magic on them. So I did, and then they had to run alongside the carriage the whole way home. Honestly, I feel quite bad about it."

Apparently, the situation was chaotic when I'd left without them, and Gramps found himself being pressured by Aina.

I lingered in the garden to let Jeanne rest for a while, but suddenly I heard a commotion out by the gate. As Aina had finished lecturing Aura, she went to see what was happening, and returned with the triplets.

"Tenmaaaa!"

"We lost!"

"That ogre is nuts!"

The triplets were talking about Gulliver, of course.

"I can't believe that ogre beat us..." Primera looked upset too. Kriss didn't look that bothered, but when Aina mentioned that, her expression immediately changed to one of frustration. Apparently, she had been forcing herself to look composed.

"What the hell is that ogre's deal? I thought ogres were supposed to be dumb?!"

It seemed they'd thought Gulliver was just a regular ogre and they'd let down their guard. But moreover, Gulliver wasn't the only tough one on the Demon Soldiers—the other four were quite tough as well, so the girls had been in a rough spot from the beginning.

The formation they'd used was pretty standard, with Gulliver at the center and two knights on either side, but that was a tough one for the triplets to deal with. The Gunjo Flowers had Primera and Kriss act as walls while the triplets wore down the enemies, but Gulliver was enough to hold back Primera and Kriss on his own, making it a four versus three fight between the knights and the triplets.

In the end, they were able to defeat two of the knights, but because the team outnumbered and outmatched them, it was the triplets who'd fallen next, and then Gulliver had finished off Primera and Kriss.

"If it had been an ordinary ogre, Primera and I could've finished it off easy..." Kriss muttered.

Their original plan had been for the two of them to provoke Gulliver and send Primera over to help the triplets when his attacks became sloppy, but Gulliver never faltered and kept fighting tenaciously, which meant she never had any opportunity to go help out the triplets.

As they told me more about the battle, I was surprised to hear that

the sixth member of Demon Soldiers was Marquis Sammons himself. He would occasionally give Gulliver orders and every time he did, the ogre had changed his attack pattern, which, according to Kriss, had kept the audience surprised.

The triplets were depressed for a while after their defeat, but once they realized that just making it to the final qualifying round was an accomplishment, they seemed to cheer up.

The tournament sent out a letter that night, announcing the teams who would be competing in the finals. Among them, the ones I recognized were the Dawnswords, Demon Soldiers, and Sagan Tamers A. In other words, my acquaintances made up a quarter of the finalists. I didn't know the other participating teams, but as each team had a short blurb about them, I learned that the other finalists included the winners of the previous tournament, the runner-up from that year, and the runner-up from the year before last. As such, I knew I'd have to brace myself and fight to the best of my ability.

Although I was confident that my team was the strongest, I was overwhelmingly lacking in the experience department. I needed to be careful that I didn't lose because of an amateur mistake. And I needed to keep a closer eye on Namitaro this time.

The finals for the individual matches were tomorrow, and I needed to concentrate on that first. I'd have preferred to meet the Bandit King in the finals, or in the first round, but I knew that praying to the gods would be pointless. In the end, I just decided to go to bed early.

At the time, I didn't realize it, but apparently, I'd set a record as being the youngest person to ever qualify for the individual and team matches. I told Gramps that if I'd known that, I would've competed with just myself, Shiromaru, and Rocket to set an even greater record, and his laughter echoed throughout the mansion.

Extra Story: Aina's Debt

One day, I was trying to decide whether I should take on a quest at the guild when Gramps, who was polishing his staff, suddenly asked me about Aina.

"Tenma, do you know where Aina is?"

"I don't think she's here yet today. Why?"

Aina typically came over early in the morning to train Jeanne and Aura, then returned to serve Queen Maria, but it seemed like she wasn't here yet. I could tell just by looking at Jeanne and Aura, because they usually appeared exhausted by this time of day.

Of course, they never slacked off in front of me or Gramps, but I could see it on their faces when they thought I wasn't watching. If they spotted me, they would remember I was still there and quickly put a smile on their faces.

Also, Rocket gave me regular reports on them. They never let their guards down in front of Gramps, but they relaxed in front of Rocket, so he'd witnessed them complaining. By the way, when I asked Rocket if they had complained about me, he said, not really. Not believing him, I pressed him further, and he said, "They said your cooking is too good and that they've gained weight because of you." Then Rocket capped it off by telling me he thought it was probably best not to pry too much into women's affairs.

"Well, she's supposed to have those chemicals I asked for."

Gramps had asked Aina to bring him some chemical that was like varnish so he could repair his staff. She'd promised to bring it by today.

"You can only buy it at a specialty store, and since it's dangerous, it's not easy to purchase, right?"

Though it could be used as a varnish, the substance could blind you if it got into your eyes. This meant that although it had many uses for weapons, armor, and furniture, if you didn't know what you were doing, it could be quite dangerous.

"She said she uses it a lot herself and could get it cheap from a merchant who knows her."

I had to wonder why she used it so often, but I assumed it must have been for furniture restoration. Then again, would she really have had that much occasion to use it? At any rate, Rocket told me it wasn't good to pry.

As we chatted, I heard the gate open, then I saw Aina headed towards the front door. She was holding a bag, which I assumed contained Gramps's varnish.

"I think she's here." Gramps walked out to the foyer to greet her, and I decided to follow.

"Thank you for coming to greet me, Master Merlin, Master Tenma. I'm glad to be here today."

She looked slightly surprised to see us for a moment, but then regained her composure and bowed politely. By the way, Jeanne and Aura had followed Gramps and me too. They seemed even more anxious than usual. I wondered if they thought they would get punished more harshly if they made a mistake in front of me and Gramps.

Aina handed the varnish to Gramps, ignoring the two nervous girls for a moment—but only for a moment. "All right, you two. I'm going to be supervising your cleaning again today. If you'll excuse me, Master Tenma and Master Merlin."

Aina pulled the two girls away to begin cleaning the mansion. Normally, she would have finished supervising them by the time I arrived back home. I was curious to see what her training consisted of, so I decided to skip going to the guild today and secretly spy on them. I wasn't trying to stalk them or anything, but if they knew I was there, they would become self-conscious and Aina would get angry.

"Since we cleaned the second floor yesterday, let's start with the first-floor hallway today. Jeanne, you use the duster to dust off the window frame, and then Aura can polish the window after you're done. You two do the front, and I'll do the opposite side. We have a race to see who's faster. But keep in mind that even though it's a race, you're still working, so you still need to clean properly. And if you decide to cut corners, well then... Mwa ha ha."

Whoa, that was scary. Her laugh was more frightening than any I'd ever heard. I figured she must have learned how to smile and laugh in a frightening way from the queen. Honestly, I never thought I'd see someone whose smile was even scarier than Queen Maria's.

Meanwhile, Aina began cleaning at about twice the speed of Jeanne and Aura. When I looked more closely at her to figure out how she was doing it, I realized that she had no wasted movements.

"Aina can wipe a spot clean in one stroke, while it takes two or three for the other girls," I murmured to myself. Even though I was hiding, Aina suddenly turned her face in my direction, still cleaning the whole time.

The moment I saw her face move, I immediately ducked away, but I was pretty sure she realized I was there. I stayed hidden for a few moments longer, but she didn't say anything, so I figured she didn't

care if I watched.

I hid and watched the three of them for a while, and they finished cleaning the windows in less than thirty minutes. The result was that Aina had cleaned nearly two-thirds of the windows. And not only that, but...

“There’s still dirt here, here, and here. Oh, and right here.”

She pointed out the spots that weren’t clean to the two girls. As she pointed with one hand, she cleaned with the other to make it sparkling in no time flat.

“Well, this wasn’t your best cleaning job, but you didn’t seem to have tried to cut corners, so I’ll let you off the hook this time with no punishment. However, in a sense, cleaning like this might be even worse than cutting corners, because it means your technique is lacking. I’ll have to be even stricter with your training from now on.”

Jeanne and Aura started out looking happy, but once Aina had finished talking, they froze.

“All right, now it’s time to clean the floor. This time we won’t race. I want you to do it on your own. I taught you how to do it properly. You remember, don’t you?”

Ignoring the fact that the two were standing there like unmoving lumps, Aina doled out the next instructions, clapping her hands. At that signal, the two of them quickly grabbed their brooms and moved to opposite ends of the hallway. They began to carefully sweep the dirt and dust from the end of the hallway to the middle.

Jeanne came close to where I was hiding and for a moment I thought she was going to catch me, but she was so focused on her cleaning that she didn’t even notice I was there.

After they’d swept up the dust, Aina checked their work and gave them a passing grade, much to the joy of the girls. Then Aina immediately brought them to their next room.

Now it was time for them to clean the bathroom. Aina split the tasks between them. Apparently, Aina’s job was to clean the men’s bathtub, while Jeanne and Aura cleaned the women’s bathtub.

As I couldn’t exactly go into the women’s bathroom, I was about to leave, but then Aina poked her head out and called me over. “I’m relieved you didn’t try to sneak in here.”

“I wouldn’t be able to do that... Hey, aren’t you embarrassed?”

Aina was standing in front of me with her sleeves rolled up to her shoulders and her skirt rolled up to her knees so she could clean the bathtub.



“Not particularly. Why—do you like seeing women like this?” I immediately denied it and Aina said, “Good, then I’ll keep my uniform rolled up,” and went on.

She asked me why I was hiding and watching them clean. I told her I was curious about what kind of training she gave the girls, and she seemed to accept that answer. “As I said, it wouldn’t be appropriate for you to enter the women’s bathroom. You’ll have to be satisfied with watching me.”

Honestly, however, I didn’t know what the big deal would be even if I did go into the women’s bathroom right now, because it was my house—plus, I knew no one was actually using it at the moment. But then Aina told me that when the girls cleaned the bathroom, they liked to strip down to basically their underwear to make it easier to clean, and that was why I shouldn’t go inside.

“Although if that’s what gets you excited, I won’t stop you...” Aina said, making it impossible for me to do anything but stay in the men’s bathroom. Actually, even that might have looked strange to an outsider, but I decided not to think about it too much.

Afterwards, we chatted quite a bit about the girls while she cleaned, and before I knew it, the bathroom was sparkling clean.

“That should do it. I doubt the other two have finished cleaning yet, but they should be able to manage this within a year. I’ll continue supervising them, so you can go ahead to the next room.”

Aina told me they would be cleaning the kitchen next—they would clean after Gramps and I were done eating lunch. I thought it wouldn’t be strange for me to watch the three of them cook and decided to watch them openly. However, as they had gotten a lot of critiques for their bathroom-cleaning job, it took a while for them to get to the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, Master Tenma. If you haven’t eaten lunch yet, we’ll make it right now. Please just wait,” Aina said, seeming a little flustered. It was rare for her to seem panicked. I figured it was just because I had been watching them all morning and it had thrown her off.

I wondered if it was all right for her to be cooking in such a state, but it turned out to be fine. Aina worked alone, as if she had forgotten she was supposed to be training Jeanne and Aura, and lunch was ready before I knew it. She truly was a jack of all trades. If Jeanne and Aura tried to help her now, they’d only get in the way, so they sat quietly in the corner instead.

“I’m sorry that it’s such simple fare.”

Aina had prepared stew, salad, and rice. She’d hardly ever cooked rice before we’d met, but now she made it better than Jeanne, Aura,

and even me.

Her food was so delicious that everyone around the table, including me, asked for seconds. Aina continued training the girls after lunch until the evening, and they looked terribly exhausted from the hard, long hours.

“Well, that’s the end of today’s training. If you’ll excuse me, Master Merlin and Master Tenma.” She gave a sidelong glance to Jeanne and Aura, who were barely able to stand at this point, and bowed to Gramps and me before leaving. She was probably on her way back to the castle to serve the queen.

“Aina must have more stamina than most novice adventurers and knights,” I remarked.

“Hrm... She’d make a good wife for m— Argh!” Just as Gramps was about to say something highly inappropriate, there was an incredible sense of malice that came from the direction that Aina had just gone. Gramps backpedaled from the force of it, soaked in a cold sweat. By the way, Jeanne and Aura immediately fled, and I hid behind Gramps as well.

“Tenma, don’t you think it’s cruel to use an old man for a shield?”

“This is your own fault, Gramps. Anyway, I forgot to ask Aina something—I’ll be right back.” I remembered there was something I’d wanted to ask her about the training, and ran off to catch up to her.

“Do you need something, Master Tenma?”

I caught up to her a short distance away from the mansion, but she suddenly turned and spoke to me before I could say a word. I wished she would stop doing that kind of thing, because it was bad for my heart.

“There’s something I wanted to ask you about Jeanne. She was the daughter of a viscount, so I wondered if you would give her formal etiquette lessons.” I walked beside Aina, asking why Jeanne was only getting trained as a maid like Aura. “I know this is a bad way of putting it, but doesn’t she have more value as a noble? I would think the royalists would see her as a benefit if she used that to her advantage. She could pull some neutrals over to their side, for example.”

Even though Jeanne was a slave, I felt hesitant to treat her like an object since she lived in the same house as me, but it was the easiest way to get my point across.

“Hm, well, I suppose from the royalists’ perspective, that would be a way to get the most results. But it’s also the riskiest. After all, even if they used Jeanne to get several neutrals to come over to their side, they might not be able to trust them. Rather than take that risk, it would be easier to appeal to them and show them favor to create actual friendships.”

She was saying that, from the royalists' perspective, it would be better to gain favor naturally from the neutral faction, rather than using Jeanne to forcibly draw them over. That was probably mostly because I had custody of Jeanne, and I was close to the royalists myself. I might just be a commoner, but the neutrals couldn't force a relationship with Jeanne either. They'd have to go through me, whom the royalists were using as a pipeline.

"Besides, it's rather pointless for Jeanne to receive a noble lady's education at this point. After all, even though the Armelia family was duped, they still fell from grace. And even if Jeanne were to try to put everything she had into restoring her family's name, the royalists wouldn't and can't help her in this current climate. That's because Jeanne seems to be more satisfied being your slave than being a noble lady. They can see that she's happy as things are."

I'd never owned a slave before this and didn't know much about the details, but I had a feeling that Jeanne and Aura were being treated exceptionally well compared to other slaves. After all, just working in the mansion guaranteed them food and shelter. Not only that, but they ate the same food I did, and I gave them a certain amount of freedom. They also were able to receive training from the queen's maid herself. The fact that the queen was allowing her maid to do that meant that the girls were receiving attention from the most influential person in the kingdom. I couldn't be sure that wasn't a burden to Jeanne, but on the other hand, the queen wouldn't know the name of just any normal noble daughter.

"It seems you and I have different thoughts on the matter, Master Tenma. But if you wish for it, it is possible to return Jeanne's status to that of a noble without anyone being able to complain about it. Basically, you and she could marry, and then you'd have to become a noble. And I'm sure that would be easy enough to accomplish; all you'd have to do is tell Her Majesty that you wish to be a noble and you would have a title that next day."

That would be the easiest way, but...

"That would be endangering my life. I'd have to say no."

"There is another way. You could marry Princess Luna, then take Jeanne as your concubine. Jeanne would receive the same treatment as a noble, and any child the two of you had would inherit the Armelia family name. What do you think?" she asked.

"Why do all your plans start with marriage?" I asked with a vague smile. In the end, I wasn't able to get her to answer my question, and just decided to go back home. I felt like if I kept up this conversation, she would start making weird assumptions about me.

"Please be careful on your way home. And if you decide you do want to try one of my plans, please let me know. I'll come to your aid

immediately,” Aina said, and bowed her head. Now that I thought about it, having a maid bow her head to me in the middle of town stood out way too much. I looked around and saw people staring at us, just as I’d expected.

I wanted to leave as soon as possible, so I didn’t even say goodbye to her. Since right now my priority was getting the heck out of there, I didn’t really think about how Aina would react. Thinking back on it, she had the same terrifying smile on her face as she did when she was training Jeanne and Aura.

That night...

“And that’s my report for the day.”

“Thank you. Don’t you think it was a little too early to bring up marriage with Tenma, Aina?”

After I gave my report to Queen Maria, she seemed a bit perturbed. I had a feeling that was because she had wanted to tease him about the matter herself, but I figured she would get over it.

“I’m sorry. I thought that would be a good opportunity to bring up the subject.”

“The least you could do is look apologetic, you know. Most importantly, what was Tenma’s reaction?” Her Majesty asked. I thought about it a bit.

“I think he was receptive to it. Let’s say his likelihood to want to get married is at a scale between zero and ten, with ten being the full desire to get married. He was originally at zero, but I think he’s now at a one or a two after my talk with him.”

“That’s awfully obtuse. Who is he at the highest with right now, on that scale?”

I’d never really thought about it, so I considered everyone’s own charms, their various circumstances, and their relationships up until this point.

“Probably myself? Then it would be Lady Primera, Duke Sanga’s daughter. Then, with the exception of Aura, everyone else is probably the same.”

“Why did you include yourself in the rankings? On what basis have you come to this evaluation?”

“Whether the person can adequately support Master Tenma at home, help with his work, family background, appearance, age, personality...and so on.”

“I see. In other words, the first two candidates are overwhelmingly far ahead of the others. That means everyone else isn’t even in the running.”

“Your tone sounds a bit sharp, Your Majesty. Well, at any rate, besides Lady Primera, no one can compete with me when it comes to

appearance.”

“Appearance isn’t everything.”

Obviously, when it came to Lady Primera, I couldn’t compete with her family background or age, and her personality was good for a high-ranking aristocrat’s daughter. If you asked those who knew her, eight out of ten people would have agreed. However, I was quite confident in my looks, so I thought I could be in the same league as her.

Plus, when you compared me and Lady Primera—or really me and anyone else, we were the only two who stood out in that department.

Now, when it came to supporting Tenma in the house, that simply meant household chores such as cooking, laundry, and cleaning. If we were talking about the wife of an aristocrat, they would have servants to do that work. But since Master Tenma was a commoner, I was focused on each individual’s ability.

Helping him with work meant supporting his activities as an adventurer. That meant not just combat ability, but also supporting him behind the scenes by gathering information. If he were an aristocrat, this would include developing friendships with other nobles’ wives, but right now Master Tenma didn’t need that.

Taking all that into consideration, I was the one who stood out the most because of all of my abilities as a maid. Plus, I was one of the strongest people in the castle when it came to combat, and I had experience as an adventurer.

I realized that my method of evaluating the situation favored me, but then again, that was mostly what men wanted out of a woman anyway.

“I suppose that if you think about it in that way, you would be considered a marriage candidate. Do you think that as well?”

I’d expected that question and had already prepared my answer. “If I look at him as a potential marriage partner, I think he checks all the boxes. He has the income, personality, and necessary skills. I think he would make a suitable husband, but not for me.”

“Ah, I see. Because you’re in love with someone else.”

My face flushed at her response. Seeing this, Her Majesty laughed, but then a serious look returned to her face. “Is that why you’re training Jeanne and Aura instead?”

“That’s right. Jeanne could be adopted by a neutral family and marry Master Tenma then, but if he refuses, she would be married off to another noble. In that case, it’s more likely that we should just entrust her to him as his slave. As for Aura, she’s not that bad in the looks department, so she can be somewhat useful—but more as like an accessory to Jeanne.”

That was my idea to both repay and make atonements to the

Armelia family. I didn't think of them directly as my masters; however, although I did leave home early, up until that point I was raised by my parents, whose masters were the Armelia family. Therefore, I felt I had benefited from that connection.

When the Armelia family had fallen, if I had been present, I could perhaps have saved some of them, even if I couldn't have saved the entire family, along with my parents and Aura.

"I'm going to train them until they're capable on their own—until they're first-class maids." *So get ready, Jeanne...and Aura, just because you're coming along for the ride.*

Just as Aina renewed her determination, Jeanne and Aura, who were preparing dinner at the mansion, felt a sudden chill and dropped several plates, shattering them. They received a harsh lecture the next day from Aina when she came to train them.

Isekai Tensei: Reincarnated to Another World Volume 4 / End

Afterword

Hello, dear readers. This is Kenichi. I'm writing this afterword from the hospital. I was hospitalized during the third volume, and had the bad luck of ending up in the hospital this time as well. I feel bad for not taking better care of my health.

By the way, I am also working on volume five here in the hospital. Luckily, it wasn't an emergency, so I was able to bring my laptop with me. And thanks to that, I'm able to continue writing here.

Changing the subject, how did you like this volume of *Isekai Tensei*? In this volume, Tenma participated in the tournament as a fighter rather than an adventurer. He was also able to gather information about Kukuri Village and fulfill his goal of seeing the king again.

You're probably thinking that one of those is more important than the other, but personally, I wrote the story with the thinking that the journey isn't over just because someone reaches their goal. That's why he reunited with Merlin before arriving at the capital. I also put that bonus scene in there of Shiromaru running him over. As a result, Tenma ended up achieving most of his personal goals at the very beginning of this volume.

The rest of the story mainly follows him meeting the colorful cast of characters that are the royal family, reuniting with familiar faces from Kukuri Village, and his preparations for the tournament. Speaking of familiar faces, this volume had a very high reappearance rate for different characters.

However, we will be seeing more new characters in the tournament. So many new characters, in fact, that when I submitted the character sheet to my editor, most of them were cut. Well—most of those were the ones on the opposing teams and end up getting beat anyway, but still.

Putting that aside, the most important new character to appear in this volume was the Bandit King! Who do you think he is? And what's he doing here, anyway? The people who have read the web novel version know the answer to those questions already, but since there are some people who don't know, I'll keep it a secret.

As for the fifth volume, it will focus on the final battles of the tournament. The highlights will be the Bandit King's true identity, Namitaro's past, and his special move.

As of right now, both the individual and team battles will be featured in the next volume, and then the tournament will end. I hope you decide to follow the story.

My other announcement is that the manga is proceeding smoothly. By the time this book hits the bookstores, the manga will be published by MAGCOMI, so I hope you take a look at that as well.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the people involved in the publication of *Isekai Tensei*, and to the readers for their support.

Thank you very much.

- Kenichi



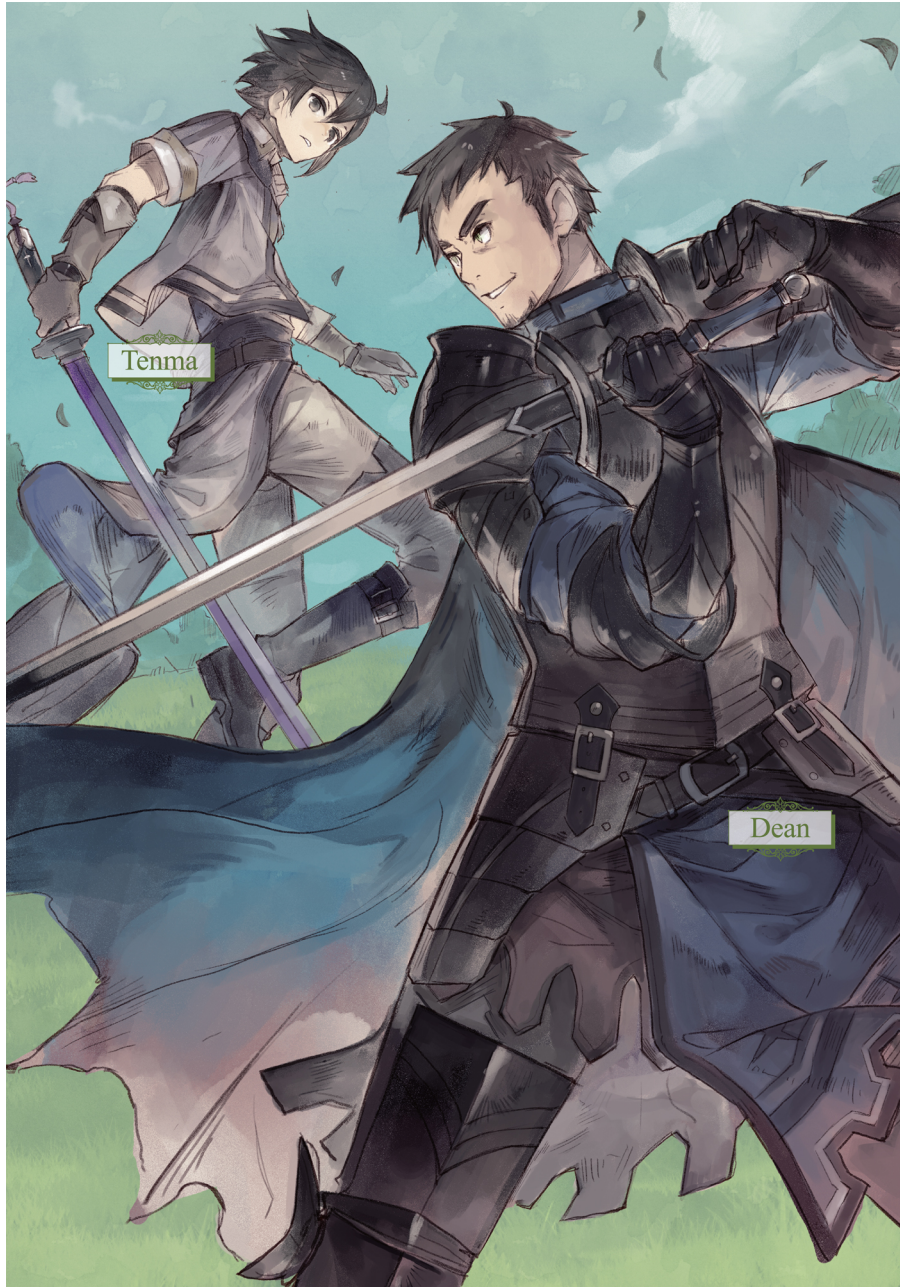
Luna

Tida

Aina

ISEKAI TENSEI:
RECRUITED TO
ANOTHER WORLD

4



Tenma

Dean

Bonus Short Story

Jeanne's Hard Work

"I can't... I can't keep on going like this!" Just as Aina's training was getting harder than it had been before, I noticed Jeanne hiding in a corner of the garden. I went to approach her, and she suddenly started yelling.

"Waaah!" This took me off guard and I yelped in surprise, quickly hiding in the shadows. But Jeanne seemed so deep in thought that she hadn't even noticed me. Continuing to hide, I watched her. With eyes closed, she began to move her hands around.

I wondered what in the world she was doing, then realized that her movements looked similar to Aina's when Aina had been showing Jeanne and Aura the proper way to clean.

Once I realized she was imitating Aina, I also noticed she was copying how Aina would react when Aura complained. After she finished with those movements, she muttered, "No, that wasn't right."

It seemed then that she was done doing her Aina impression for the moment because she proceeded to the hallway and began cleaning for real.

She had a serious look on her face and was concentrating so hard that she didn't even notice Shiromaru running in circles behind her with muddy paws. Well, she *did* finally notice when she finished cleaning the windows and it was time to mop the floor. She spotted Shiromaru wagging his tail as he ran circles around in the hallway nearby, and gave him a good scolding.

After that, she wiped Shiromaru's paws and let him go, then returned to her task of cleaning the hallway. She wasn't quite as skilled as Aura, but she did a pretty good job of it.

I thought that would be the end of it, but now she went to the kitchen and started again, visualizing the process first before getting down to business. She began cooking the same recipe Aina had taught her before, but quickly realized she was making way more food than the recipe called for. When she realized her mistake, she started freaking out a bit, but then gave up on trying to correct it and finished the job anyway.

Meanwhile, Shiromaru and Solomon found me hiding in the kitchen, but then they got distracted when they saw Jeanne was making dinner, so they went to beg her for some food. That worked

out just fine for Jeanne because she could just give them the extra food she had made. And the whole time, she still had no idea I was watching her.

“Hm? Aura?” As I peeked into the kitchen, I noticed Aura coming up behind me. I didn’t know what she might say when she realized I was spying on Jeanne, so I quickly moved before she spotted me.

“Oh? What are you doing, Jeanne?”

“I’m practicing cooking...”

Apparently Jeanne was trying to do all of this in secret, because she looked embarrassed as she answered. Aura didn’t take the hint, however, and looked at the food, then gave it a taste. “There’s not enough salt. Also, I think you should add more herbs.”

“Ugh...”

Jeanne must’ve thought she’d done a good job, because she looked shocked at Aura’s critique. But she did as Aura had said and added more herbs and salt, her shoulders slumping all the while.

“You *are* Aina’s sister, so it’s no wonder you’re good at cooking...”

“It’s not because I’m her sister. It’s because I have more experience than you. The more you cook for others who give you their opinions, the better your cooking will become. In my case, I learned from my mother, so I’ve got the basics down...”

Aura must’ve begun remembering a time when her family was still together, because her voice trailed off. Jeanne must have been recalling the past as well, because her expression had grown dark.

Just then...

“Ah-roo?” Shiromaru let out a silly sound and knocked over a cup that was on the counter. I thought he must have been trying to eat the leftover soup in the cup, but he’d missed.

The cup landed on the floor and shattered to pieces, and the sound of it brought the two girls back to their senses. Once they’d seen what had happened, they spotted Shiromaru trying to escape from the kitchen and caught him to give him another scolding.

I had to admit that, in a sense, Shiromaru had good timing. I would’ve given him a little more praise if his actions hadn’t been motivated by greed.

“Something smells good. Did you cook something?”

Since Shiromaru had gotten a fine lecture, I figured it was time for me to make my appearance, so I walked into the kitchen. They both looked surprised to see me and quickly began sweeping up the broken cup. Shiromaru gave me a look that said, “Why didn’t you come bail me out sooner?”

“No, I was just practicing my cooking,” Jeanne said.

“Hey, why don’t you have Master Tenma taste it?” Aura suggested.

Jeanne frowned for a moment, then relented and scooped up a bit of the soup into a bowl for me.

“It’s not as amazing as Aina’s cooking, but I think it’s pretty good. I think you probably should’ve either chopped up the veggies smaller or cooked them for longer. I guess that’s all down to personal preference, though,” I said.

Jeanne listened intently to my comments. “I’ll try that next time, then.”

“Good for you, Jeanne. Master Tenma said it was good!”

Jeanne nodded happily. That night for dinner, we decided to have Jeanne’s soup.

A few days later, Aina heard this story and praised Jeanne for her hard work, but also scolded her for using ingredients in Gramps’s kitchen for practice without asking for permission first. Then, Aura got mad at Aina for negating all of Jeanne’s hard work.



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Isekai Tensei: Recruited to Another World Volume 4
by Kenichi

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